

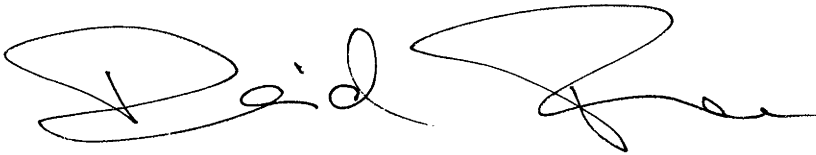
A CHILD OF HIS AGE: SIGMUND FREUD AND THE LITERATURE OF THE DECADENCE

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March 1998

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of
The Australian National University

Except for such quotations, ideas and information as I have attributed to other sources, this thesis is wholly my own original work.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David R. Fox". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "David" and last name "Fox" clearly distinguishable, and "R." in the middle.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to my supervisor Professor Iain Wright, whose guidance and enthusiasm have been invaluable.

I gratefully acknowledge the influence of Dr Peter Kirkpatrick at the University of Western Sydney, Nepean, who supervised the Honours project out of which this thesis grew.

For their good company and generous help I thank Hugh Clapin, Sarah Engledow, Christiane Gerblinger, Belinda Lee, Mary McKenzie, Lee Taylor and Nick Terrell.

I would also like to thank the following people for suggestions and advice: Raewyn Arthur, Mary Besemeres, Rosemary Campbell, Christine Carroll, Susan Conley, Livio Dobrez, Subhash Jaireth, Barry Jones, Des O'Malley, David Parker, and Clara Tuite.

ABSTRACT

In 1899 Sigmund Freud published *The Interpretation of Dreams*, introducing the world to a method of analysis which claimed to expose the hidden meaning not only of dreams, but of many other mental products besides, including literature. The European literature of the years leading up to the *Dreams* book seems to offer particularly handsome repayment of Freudian analysis. Manifestoes of aestheticism like Pater's 'Conclusion' to *The Renaissance* read like assertions of the pleasure principle over the reality principle; Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* can fairly effortlessly be construed as an account of the ego's relations with the superego; Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde* can with similar ease be read as a parable about the fragility of the ego and the wickedness of the id; the dark mental region "down there" from which Symbolist poets claimed to obtain their imagery might plausibly be identified with the Freudian unconscious; *The Brothers Karamazov*, with its extended treatment of the theme of parricide, looks like a transparent enough expression of Dostoevsky's Oedipus complex; and in the dark philosophy of Nietzsche one finds ideas strikingly similar to such Freudian "discoveries" as repression and the theory of instincts.

"Applications of analysis," Freud once wrote, "are always confirmations of it as well" [SE, 22: 146]. According to that proposition, the above writings, by yielding so readily to Freud's theories, act as evidence of the scientific validity of his approach. But perhaps Freud's analytical template fits the literature of his near-contemporaries a little

too snugly. Perhaps it is precisely *because* they are Freud's near-contemporaries that these writers illustrate his theories so well. Perhaps, in other words, what we are looking at here is not a vindication of Freudian theory, but a damning demonstration of its rootedness in the European culture of Freud's age.

This suspicion is strengthened when we consider that in each of the cases mentioned above, the themes which are so amenable to a Freudian reading had perfectly good cultural and historical reasons to be there. The theme of parricide, for example, has demonstrable connections with the revolutionary political atmosphere of the late nineteenth century. The aesthete's emphasis on individual pleasure can also be read historically, as a retaliation against a moral order bent on imposing a culture of unpleasure. If social conditions were capable of producing these quasi-Freudian tropes in the literature of Freud's time, could the same forces have had a hand in shaping the corresponding concepts in Freud?

My first chapter explores these matters in relation to that most representative of *fin-de-siècle* writers, Oscar Wilde, paying particular attention to his most Freudian work, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

My second chapter broadens the inquiry: it considers, against their historical background, the writings of a range of Wilde's contemporaries: Pater, Huysmans, Nietzsche, the Symbolists, and so on.

In Chapter Three, I use the work of such writers to demonstrate the culturally-inspired nature of a central concept of Freud's, the Oedipus complex.

In Chapter Four, I dispute Freud's Oedipal reading of *The Brothers Karamazov* by considering the thoroughness with which that work historicises its central theme of parricide.

By looking beyond the suspicious ease with which Freud can explain these writers, we discover a deeper process by which these writers can explain Freud: they raise ideas uncannily close to his, but place them squarely in their historical context, and thereby issue a hefty challenge to the scientific pretensions of psychoanalysis.

PREFACE

In 1975, while reviewing a book about psychiatry, Sir Peter Medawar wrote:

The opinion is steadily gaining ground that doctrinaire psychoanalytic theory is the most stupendous intellectual confidence trick of the twentieth century: and a terminal product as well - something akin to a zeppelin in the history of ideas, a vast structure of radically unsound design with no posterity. [Quoted by Sulloway, 1979: 499]

Medawar's verdict is one of the most aggressively worded - and most often quoted - contributions to the ongoing debate about the scientific validity of Freud's ideas - a debate that has been referred to, aptly, as "the Freud Wars". To one degree or another, these wars have been going on ever since Freud published the founding work of psychoanalysis, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in 1900. As early as 1909, for instance, the sexologist Albert Moll complained that psychoanalysis "involves so many arbitrary interpretations, that it is impossible to speak of truth in any strict sense of the term" [quoted by Sulloway, 1979: 471].

More recently, psychoanalysis has been subjected to vigorous critiques by such writers as Ernest Gellner - who despairingly concluded that within the terms established by psychoanalysis "no retrieval of empirical content is possible, when the links between theory and fact are so loose" [Gellner, 1993: 221] - and Frederick Crews, who has called psychoanalysis "the paradigmatic pseudoscience of our epoch - one that deserves to be addressed not in the thrifty spirit of 'What can we salvage from Freud?' but rather with principled attention to its faulty logic, its manufacturing of its own evidence, and its facile explanation of adult behavior by reference to unobservable and arbitrarily posited childhood fantasy" [Crews et. al., 1997: 9]. As Crews himself points out, though, "there is nothing especially original in my apprehension of Freud and psychoanalysis. I have done little more than synopsise the

work of herculean scholars like Henri Ellenberger, Frank Sulloway, and Malcolm Macmillan and of persistent philosophical inquirers like Adolf Grunbaum and Frank Cioffi" [ibid.: 9].

It is important to note that these revisionist Freud scholars did not necessarily embark on their projects out of *a priori* hostility towards Freud. Frank Sulloway, for example, in his 1979 book *Freud: Biologist of the Mind*, writes of Freud's "scientific greatness", of the "timeless quality of his insights", and of "his brilliant legacy to mankind" - even though Sulloway's own research suggests that psychoanalysis was in certain important respects scientifically flawed [Sulloway, 1979: 499, 500, 503].¹ After meticulously demonstrating Freud's heavy reliance on biological theories of his contemporaries - some of which are now considered to have been entirely erroneous - Sulloway offers the following conclusion:

Acceptance of Freud's historical debt to biology requires a rather uncongenial conclusion for most psychoanalytic practitioners, namely, that Freud's theories reflect the faulty logic of outmoded nineteenth-century biological assumptions, particularly those of a psychophysicalist, Lamarckian, and biogenetic nature.... Plausible enough as they may have seemed to Freud, such assumptions were nevertheless wrong; and much that is wrong with orthodox psychoanalysis may be traced directly back to them. [497-498]

Sulloway thus delivers findings which contradict "the traditional account of Freud's achievements", which

has acquired its mythological proportions at the expense of historical context. Indeed, historical 'decontextualisation' is a prerequisite for good myths, which invariably seek to deny history. This denial process has followed two main

¹For an analysis of the contradictions between Sulloway's enthusiastic endorsements of psychoanalysis and his subversive findings about it, see Crews, 1986: 97-111.

tendencies in psychoanalytic history - namely, the extreme reluctance of Freud and his followers to acknowledge the biological roots of psychoanalysis, thus transforming Freud into a crypto-biologist; and the creation and elaboration of the 'myth of the hero' in the psychoanalytic movement. [445]

Sulloway's book, then, has the effect of correcting this myth, by supplying abundant evidence of the historical contingency of Freud's theories. Sulloway's Freud is "anything but isolated from the intellectual currents of his age" [496].

When Sulloway speaks of intellectual currents, he means currents in scientific - and especially biological - thought. But his work has been supplemented by other researchers who have considered the ways in which Freud reproduced aspects of the cultural and literary *Zeitgeist*. Carl Schorske, for example, in his 1981 study *Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture*, endeavours to read Freud as a man of his period - "a period of historical transition imperious in its demand for what Heinz Kohut has called 'a reshuffling of the self'" [Schorske, 1981: 209]. Schorske poses another challenge to the historically decontextualising myth, by finding in psychoanalysis the same sensitivity to its historical moment that one finds in creative Viennese artists like Musil, Hoffmansthal and Schnitzler.²

But the cultural conditions in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna were by no means unique to that city. Freud's city simply reflected - in a particularly intense way - trends characteristic of the whole of *fin-de-siècle* Europe. As Schorske himself puts it, "during the last five years of the nineteenth century, Austria-Hungary seemed to be serving, as one of its poets observed, as 'a little world in which the big one holds its tryouts' - tryouts for Europe's social and political disintegration. The Habsburg Empire was pulling apart at the seams internally as Europe was internationally:

²For similar approaches to Freud, see: Franz Kuna's essay 'Vienna and Prague, 1890 - 1928' in Bradbury, M. and McFarlane, J. (eds) *Modernism 1890-1930* (Penguin Books: Harmondsworth, 1987); Janik and Toulmin's *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson: London, 1973); and Billa Zanusso's *The Young Freud: The Origins of Psychoanalysis in Late Nineteenth-Century Viennese Culture* (Basil Blackwell: New York, 1986).

INTRODUCTION

A Matter of Evidence: The Curious Case of the Forgotten Psychiatrist

What did Sigmund Freud have in common with Friedrich Nietzsche and Oscar Wilde?

Surprisingly enough, this provocative question comes up in a work of Freud's own, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. Originally published in 1901, the *Psychopathology* went through twelve further editions in Freud's lifetime - to "almost every one" of which, James Strachey tells us, Freud added fresh material [Strachey, 1966: vii].¹ In 1907 Freud inserted a chapter - which constitutes the third chapter of the final text - called 'The Forgetting of Names and Sets of Words.' In 1910, he added to this chapter, among other things, an account of a case reported to him by his Hungarian colleague Sándor Ferenczi. In its entirety, the case reads as follows:

'A lady, who had heard something about psycho-analysis, could not recall the name of the psychiatrist Jung.[†]

'The following names came to her mind instead: Kl---- (a name), Wilde, Nietzsche, Hauptmann.

'I did not tell her the name and invited her to give free associations to each name in turn.

'Starting from Kl---- she immediately thought of Frau Kl----, and of how she was a prim and affected person, but looked very well

¹James Strachey was the General Editor of the *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, henceforth SE.

for her *age*. "She's *not ageing*." As a common characterization of Wilde and Nietzsche she named "insanity". Then she said chaffingly: "You Freudians will go on looking for the causes of insanity till you're insane yourselves." Then: "I can't bear Wilde and Nietzsche. I don't understand them. I hear they were both homosexuals; Wilde had dealings with *young* people." (In spite of having uttered the correct name - in Hungarian, it is true - in this sentence, she was still unable to recall it.)

'Starting from Hauptmann, first "*Halbe*"* and then "*Jugend*" occurred to her; and it was then for the first time, after I had drawn her attention to the word "*Jugend*", that she realised she had been in search of the name *Jung*.

'This lady had lost her husband when she was thirty-nine and had no prospect of marrying again. Thus she had certainly reason enough to avoid recalling anything that reminded her of *youth* or *age*. It is striking that the ideas screening the missing name were associated entirely with its content and that associations with its sound were absent.'

[†] [*Jung*' is also the German for 'young'.]

^{*} [Hauptmann and Halbe were both celebrated German dramatists. One of Halbe's best-known plays was *Jugend* ('Youth').]

[Freud, 1966: 26-27 - italics, and footnotes, in original.]

For the reader's convenience, Freud italicises the portions of the woman's free associations that seem to him significant.² This has the unintended consequence of drawing our attention to the stupendous

²Even though the case is given to us in quotation marks, as if it were a verbatim reprinting of Ferenczi's account, for the sake of convenience I will refer to the reading as though it were authored by Freud himself. Certainly it is authorised by Freud: it is an impeccable implementation of his theories and methods, and he presents it to us, with his full approval, in a book that bears his name alone.

quantity of material which Freud deems *insignificant*, dispensable. The italicised words are as isolated as the specks of glitter in a gold-panner's dish of sludge. Unlike a gold-panner, though, Freud seems to possess no objective standard telling him what to keep and what to throw away. From a scientific point of view, as Wittgenstein said, the "procedure of free association ... is queer, because Freud never shows how we know where to stop - where is the right solution.... The reason why he calls one sort of analysis the right one, does not seem to be a matter of evidence" [Wittgenstein, 1973: 77].

But from Freud's point of view the procedure was far from arbitrary. He knew precisely where to stop: at the point where the free associations agreed with - and thereby vindicated - his theories of the mind. ("Applications of analysis," as Freud frankly wrote, late in his career, "are always confirmations of it as well" [SE, 22: 146].) In this particular case, the hypothesis being applied and confirmed is one which Freud has framed, also in italics, at the conclusion of the book's first chapter. *"By the side of simple cases where proper names are forgotten there is a type of forgetting which is motivated by repression"* [Freud, 1966: 7].

When the beam of this hypothesis is trained on the free associations of the Jung woman, certain words - the words that Freud puts into italics - take on a glitter of significance. And there is no doubt that the repression hypothesis proves viable in this case: it provides us with a plausible account of why this lady has forgotten the name 'Jung' and why she should have thought of these particular names in connection with it. There is indeed something about the forgotten name that the lady's conscious mind might conceivably find repulsive; and each of the names that come to her mind instead can also, ultimately, be connected with the unpleasant topic of youth.

But the mere fact that Freud's interpretation proceeds according to certain theoretical precepts does not answer Wittgenstein's objection that it is not a matter of evidence. It only raises the wider question of whether those theoretical precepts are a matter of evidence. When Freud answers that question with the claim that the evidence for his theories lies in their effectiveness as a mode of interpretation - application is vindication - we have a right to be unimpressed. For as we shall see in a moment, it is possible to interpret the woman's free associations in at least one other way. Indeed it seems fair to say that the ways in which the woman's associations - or any phenomenon - *can* be interpreted are innumerable, perhaps infinite. One could interpret the woman's associations as a message from aliens who have commandeered her mind. One could argue that the woman has forgotten the name, and has remembered these other names instead, because she has a bad memory, or because she is an ignoramus. Since more than one interpretation of the material is possible, it follows that the mere fact that an interpretation *can be made* is not enough to establish that it is the *right* interpretation. One is therefore not entitled to say that one's hypotheses have been proved scientifically correct simply because they are capable of yielding an interpretation. If we are to believe that a Freudian interpretation is anything more than *an* interpretation, one interpretation among many, we must have some prior reason to believe in the rules of psychoanalysis - some hard evidence of their validity which lies outside the closed circuit of self-endorsement formed when a theory produces a passable interpretation.

Freud himself demonstrates an awareness of this principle when, during *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), he alludes to a conception of scientific proof considerably more stringent than the notion that application is vindication. The psychoanalytical theory of jokes, Freud explains,

has been arrived at by inference; and if from an inference of this kind one is led, not to a familiar region, but on the contrary, to one that is alien and new to one's thought, one calls the inference a 'hypothesis' and *rightly refuses to regard the relation of the hypothesis to the material from which it was inferred as a 'proof' of it*. It can only be regarded as 'proved' if it is reached by another path as well and if it can be shown to be the nodal point of still other connections. [Freud, 1991c: 236 - emphasis added.] ³

If, in other words, one sees a man with a beard and then infers that all men have beards, one cannot prove one's hypothesis correct simply by pointing back to the man with the beard. The hypothesis is proved only if it can be substantiated via "other paths" as well - that is, by the observation of other men.

Of course the theory of repression has proved infinitely more durable than the proposition that all men have beards. A Freudian might argue that durability, in this context, is the same thing as substantiation. If, after a hundred years or so of exposure to data, the theory of repression has yet to encounter one case which has conclusively disproved it, then surely it must be considered scientifically valid by now. But here we must take note of a critical point. The hypothesis that all men have beards seeks confirmation - and ultimately suffers disconfirmation - from objects: men with beards and men without them. The thesis of repression, on the other hand, derives confirmation not from objects but *interpretations* of mental artefacts (dreams, stories, slips,

³Freud qualifies this brief outbreak of empirical rigour by adding: "But proof of this sort is not to be had, in view of the fact that our knowledge of unconscious processes has scarcely begun. In the realization that we are standing on ground that has never before been trodden, we are thus content, from our point of observation, to take one single, short and uncertain step forward into the unexplored region" [Freud, 1991c: 236].

free associations) conducted by Freud himself according to his own rules. In view of this circumstance, it is hardly surprising or impressive that books like *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* are full of interpretations which confirm Freudian doctrine. They are Freudian interpretations, and could scarcely be expected to do anything *but* bear out Freudian theory.

We can bring this discussion back to particulars by returning to the case of the 'Jung' woman. Let us suspend, for a moment, any preconception we might have that the technique Freud uses to decode her free associations is scientifically valid. Let us instead examine the intrinsic merits and demerits of his interpretation. Is Freud's reading so thorough, so exhaustive, that it puts all other interpretations in the shade? Is it, combined with countless other readings like it, enough to compel a belief in the rules of psychoanalysis?

As I have noted, the quality of the Jung reading which leaps to the eye is something which one is inclined to think of as a grave defect: namely, the fact that it engages with only a tiny fraction of the material at hand. The bulk of the woman's associations, the material that Freud leaves in roman type, cannot be directly illuminated by the theory of repression. That is not to say, of course, that this material is *inconsistent* with Freud's hypothesis. On the contrary, Freud always insisted that repressed thoughts can only resurface in a veiled form, in the company of a certain amount of screening material only loosely connected with the unconscious idea. What this doctrine means in practical terms, as the Jung case clearly shows us, is that a Freudian interpretation will at best be a matter of *some* of the evidence. That handful of italicised words resonates with hidden meaning, but the rest is silence. To put it another way, Freud's hypothesis enables him to see much more in the text than meets the naked eye, but it also requires him to see a great deal less.

This is most conspicuously so in the case of the names Nietzsche and Wilde. Free-associating on these names, the woman offers some five or six observations. Only the last of these - the observation that Wilde "had dealings with *young* people" - strikes Freud as significant. To the hypothesis-free eye, however, this looks like one of the least meaningful of the woman's reflections. Before she comes to it, she makes several remarks which, although they refuse to be illuminated by the repression hypothesis, nevertheless seem to harbour some provocative insinuations about the relationship between Jung, Wilde and Nietzsche. Let us consider these other remarks, and see if they suggest any alternative interpretations of the case.

The woman begins by naming 'insanity' as a characteristic of both Nietzsche and Wilde. She is off the mark there, of course: in truth, Nietzsche was the lone madman of the pair. Her belief that both men were homosexual is likewise only half right: the author of *The Gay Science* was straight. One might suppose that these errors are beside the point, since we are in a realm in which mere facts matter far less than the woman's impressions and beliefs. But that would be to overlook the possibility that the woman's carelessness with these facts might tell us something important about her mind. The woman thinks Wilde was insane, even though he wasn't. Is it possible that she assumes he was insane because he was homosexual? In other words, are we dealing with a lady for whom homosexuality and insanity are not particularly distinguishable phenomena? Perhaps she even considers these things synonymous: all homosexuals are no doubt insane; and lunatics may as well be sexual perverts into the bargain.

"I can't bear Nietzsche and Wilde," the woman declares. When one takes into account everything she says about Nietzsche and Wilde, one begins to suspect that it is this hostile attitude to them, rather than

her belief that both men were "insane", which fundamentally unites these names in her mind, and which fuels her free associations. It is *because* they were insane and homosexual - and also because "I don't understand them" - that the woman cannot bear Nietzsche and Wilde.

The qualities, or supposed qualities, for which the woman hates Nietzsche and Wilde can be reduced to an essential idea: that of decadence, or subversion. Homosexuality, insanity and unintelligibility are dangerously subversive things - or are so, at any rate, by the bourgeois Victorian standards which this woman seems to possess to the point of caricature. But if the grounds on which she finds Wilde and Nietzsche subversive are spurious, there was one arena in which both men were genuinely and wilfully subversive, even perverse: in their writings. While one doubts that the Jung woman read deeply enough into their *oeuvres* to find this out for herself, it is not at all unlikely that she had vaguely got wind of their amoral gist, and had thereby gathered that to detest these writers because she did not understand them was to take a short-cut to the scandalised attitude at which she would have inevitably arrived by understanding them fully.

According to Freud, the woman's allegation that "Wilde had dealings with young people" is the only one of her remarks about Wilde and Nietzsche worthy of our attention, since it is the only one which can be connected with the supposedly repressed idea. It will be noticed, however, that this remark does not concern Nietzsche at all. Freud seems content to suppose that the name 'Nietzsche' stands at one remove from the repressed idea. In other words, it has nothing *in itself* to do with the repressed idea of youth, but is connected to it only via its link with the name of Wilde. Although Freud will inform us, later in the *Psychopathology*, that "nothing in the mind is arbitrary or undetermined" [242], his account of what happens in the mind of the

Jung woman fails to specify why the appearance of Nietzsche's name is *not* arbitrary: what has determined that Nietzsche's name *in particular* should have come up here, instead of Lord Alfred Douglas's, say, or Rimbaud's? On the other hand, if we postulate that the woman's associations proceed not from the idea of *youth* but from that of *decadence*, the appearance of Nietzsche's name looks far from accidental, for it has a firm primary link with this idea.

So does the name 'Hauptmann'. The constraints of the repression hypothesis oblige Freud to dismiss the appearance of Hauptmann's name, like Nietzsche's, as somewhat arbitrary, since it is connected to the repressed idea only via the name of Halbe, who wrote *Youth*. But if we suppose that the woman's thoughts are governed by the theme of subversion, then we can see quite clearly why Gerhart Hauptmann might belong in its own right in the company of Wilde and Nietzsche. Hauptmann's 1892 play *Die Weber* [*The Weavers*], for which he would receive the 1912 Nobel Prize, was the work which "thrust [him] into the arena of world opinion" [Maurer, 1982: 46]. On its first appearance in 1892, the play, which deals with the 1844 revolt of oppressed Silesian textile workers, became the subject of what has been called "the most spectacular political censorship trial in the history of German literature" [Manfred Brauneck, quoted by Maurer, 1982: 46]. The right wing saw it "as a thinly disguised attack on contemporary social conditions; worse still, as a dangerous incitement to revolution.... [I]t was translated into Russian by Lenin's sister and had an impact not only on Russian literature but on the Russian Revolution itself" [Maurer, 1982: 46-47]. In light of these facts, one sees why Hauptmann, in the mind of a bourgeois snob who is offended by things like insanity, homosexuality and unintelligibility, might rank as a figurehead of *fin-de-siècle* decadence.

The plot thickens, as it were, when we consider the woman's comment that "You Freudians will go on looking for the causes of insanity till you're insane yourselves." At this point the woman's free associations become considerably freer than Freud would have liked: for she is now suggesting that insanity - the quality she has named as the first "common characteristic" of Wilde and Nietzsche - is also a characteristic, albeit an incipient one, of "you Freudians." If we are correct in thinking that the woman takes Wilde's and Nietzsche's "insanity" as a kind of emblem of their hateful decadence, then it seems that the woman is now associating *Freudianism itself* with the decadent theme. This becomes all the more important when one remembers that the designation "you Freudians" applies not only to her analyst Ferenczi, but also to the man whose name she is trying to recall - Jung.⁴ I have already surmised that it is the idea of subversion, or decadence, which generates the substitute names and her free associations on them. Now we have independent confirmation, as it were, that the name which forms the kernel of all the woman's thoughts - the forgotten name - is indeed associated in her mind with decadent practices.

In summary, I am proposing that the woman's thought processes worked in the following way. She is unable for some reason or another to remember the name Jung. All she can remember about him is that he is a Freudian. The names she thinks of instead therefore proceed from the idea of "Freudianism". Judging by the names she associates with it, the woman's idea of Freudianism is unflattering. She associates it with three literary men whose writings (and personal lives) violated Victorian

⁴On this fundamental point Freud's account is less than crystal clear. Although we are told that the lady "had heard something about psycho-analysis", we are then informed that the name she cannot recall is that of "the *psychiatrist* Jung". This seems a somewhat disingenuous way of referring to a man who by 1910, when Freud added this case to the book, was the second-most eminent *psychoanalyst* in the world - the "crown prince", as Freud himself once put it, to Freud's king [Webster, 1995: 372].

standards of propriety, and whom she therefore finds repugnant. She also thinks of a certain Fraud Kl----, a Dorian Gray-like woman whose "prim and affected" facade conceals an ugly carnal truth. These substitute names, together with her free associations on them, compel the conclusion that the woman finds Jung, and Freudians in general, threatening and unpalatable.

If we are to accept Freud's suggestion that application of an hypothesis amounts to vindication of it, then our hypothesis must be proclaimed correct. But since Freud's completely different hypothesis can be proclaimed correct on the same grounds, it appears we were right to suspect that this standard of proof was too slack.

If neither interpretation can be called definitive, then, what can we say about their comparative merits? It seems fair to say that my interpretation has engaged with more of the available material than Freud's does. The subversion hypothesis can account for the appearance of all four of the "screen" names and can explain all of the woman's associations; Freud's reading, by contrast, places two of the four substitute names at one remove from the forgotten name, and dismisses the bulk of the free associations as inessential. Moreover, Freud's reading takes a curiously one-dimensional view of the name "Jung." Although we are told that "the ideas screening the missing name were associated entirely with its content and that associations with its sound were absent", this is not strictly true. It is not the content of the name "Jung" which spawns the lady's ideas; it is the content of the word "young", a word which Jung's name raises purely by virtue of its sound. One therefore wonders why Freud bothers to tell us that the lady "had heard something about psycho-analysis" - for as far as Freud's reading is concerned, Jung might as well be an architect or a wrestler as a psychoanalyst. All that matters is that his name is a homonym for the traumatic word *jung*.

But while Freud's interpretation is somewhat economical in its use of the data, it has a spectacular advantage which might be said to compensate for that. It provides us with an explanation of *why* the lady forgot the name in the first place, by showing us the mechanisms of repression and resistance in action. My reading fails to furnish any such explanation: it does not identify a motive for the forgetting. Of course forgetting does not *have* to have a motive - even Freud himself theoretically left room for accidental forgetting. ("*By the side of simple cases where proper names are forgotten* there is a type of forgetting which is motivated by repression" [Freud, 1966: 7].⁵) The subversion hypothesis must be content to assume that this case of forgetting was accidental, undetermined.

In other words, this case of forgetting can be approached in two different ways. One can either construct a novel and ambitious theoretical explanation of it, or else one can attend to all of the data - but one cannot do both. In the course of the following chapters, we will find Freud faced by this kind of choice time and time again: and seldom will we find him taking the second path.

If the 'Jung' woman considered Freud's theories beyond the pale, she was not alone. The public belief that psychoanalysis was improper or even perverse was painfully familiar to Freud - even his own wife called his researches a "form of pornography" [quoted by Gay, 1988: 61]. Freud's

⁵This allusion to the possibility of accidental forgetting is hard to square with the dictum that "nothing in the mind is arbitrary or undetermined" [ibid.: 242]. In practice, Freud tended to adhere to the second of these principles, behaving as though mental accidents did not occur. It is hard to think of a single moment in his work where he points to a non-Freudian slip, or a meaningless dream, or a cigar that is just a cigar. Indeed Freud's rules of interpretation would seem effectively to preclude the possibility of mental accident, since they are so flexible that there is probably no phenomenon which they could not *eventually* identify as unconsciously determined.

standard reply to such charges was that his work, far from being disreputable, warranted the reverence due to a science. In the 'Prefatory Remarks' to his 1905 case-history of 'Dora', for example, Freud took pains to stress that although he would shortly be heard discussing such matters as fellatio and masturbation with his teen-aged patient, any relish he took in these conversations was purely scientific. "Am I, then, to defend myself upon this score as well?" Freud sighs:

...[I]t would be the mark of a singular and perverse prurience to suppose that conversations of this kind are a good means of exciting or of gratifying sexual desires. For the rest, I feel inclined to express my opinion on this subject in a few borrowed words: 'It is deplorable to have to make room for protestations of this sort in a scientific work; but let no one reproach me on this account but rather accuse the spirit of the age' [Freud, 1990b: 37-38 - the "borrowed words" come from one R. Schmidt.]

By using somebody else's words to carry the scientific defence, Freud reinforces the impression that his endeavours have objective legitimacy. But there is a sense in which this response does not adequately defend the honour of psychoanalysis. To understand what that sense is, we must first appreciate that there are two entirely different intellectual planes on which one can find psychoanalysis disreputable. One is the epitome of Victorian narrow-mindedness: Freud speaks of fellatio and masturbation, and therefore by definition he is a pornographer. We can afford to ignore this jejune judgement. But there were more solid grounds on which a contemporary might have found Freud's new "science" suspect: not merely because it dealt with sexual subject matter, but because its manner of dealing with it exhibited none

of the rigour or responsibility associated with the scientific method. To impugn Freud's efforts in this second way implies the grave charge that he is not a scientist. In order to quash that charge, Freud must do something far more elaborate than simply claim that he *is so* a scientist.

When the Jung woman compares Freud with Wilde and Nietzsche, her remarks at first seem to occupy the more modest of these intellectual planes. To place Freud among the ranks of the insane or the sexually perverted simply because he was bold enough to study them is absurd, and we can happily, echoing Freud, blame such thinking on the "spirit of the age". But by likening Freud to a philosopher and a poet, the woman also touches, no doubt by accident, on a substantial query about the epistemological status of psychoanalysis which remains valid to this day. As Freud himself freely admitted, many of his insights had been anticipated by philosophers and poets - and yet "by choosing," as one writer puts it, "to present his revolutionary innovations as standard pieces of scientific theory, on a par with the molecular theory of gases or the germ theory of disease, he made the largest possible claim for their objective truth" [Quinton, 1972: 73]. Did Freud support this large claim with an appropriately abundant quantity of hard evidence? Or have his observations been proved no more objectively true than the creative whims of a Nietzsche or a Wilde?

The possibility that Freud was more creative writer than scientist began to dog him even before the advent of psychoanalysis. In 1895, he published the *Studies on Hysteria*, co-authored by Josef Breuer. In it, Freud admitted that it was

strange that the case histories I write should read like short stories and that, as one might say, they lack the serious stamp of science. I must console myself with the reflection that the nature of my subject is evidently responsible for this, rather than any preference of my own. [Breuer and Freud, 1956: 160]

But the nature of Freud's subject was not as neatly separable from his personal preferences as he makes out. The following year, he would confess to his friend Wilhelm Fliess that "as a young man my only longing was for philosophical knowledge, and now that I am changing over from medicine to psychology I am in the process of fulfilling this wish" [E. Freud, 1961: 241]. In other words, Freud's decision to become a psychologist had been in the first place a function of his philosophical bent. Moreover, the way in which Freud approached his material was peculiarly philosophical. "[I]n the nineteenth century," as Philip Rieff explains, "science was entirely identified with the 'physical' method [of psychology]; 'dialectical' explanations were consigned to religion and philosophy" [Rieff, 1959: 16]. Since Freud's approach was distinctly of the second kind, he could hardly blame the short-storyish quality of his publications entirely on "the nature of my subject". Indeed he admits as much during the same discussion in the *Studies on Hysteria*, when he points out that his method eschews the "local diagnoses and electro-prognosis" dictated by his neuropathological training, and involves instead "a detailed description of mental processes such as we are accustomed to find in the works of imaginative writers ... [together] with the use of a few psychological formulas" [Breuer and Freud, 1956: 160-161].

There is something else we are accustomed to find in the works of imaginative writers: imagination. Their narratives, in general, are made

up: they are not objectively true. This defining property of fiction was present in Freud's early work, as even the most sympathetic accounts of his life tell us. In 1896, Freud formulated his seduction theory, which confidently proposed that the key to formation of neuroses lay in the patient's having been sexually molested as a young child, usually by its father. The following year Freud abandoned the theory, having decided that it was overly improbable and insufficiently supported by the data - that it was, in short, a fictional narrative.⁶ Others had perceived this fictionality before Freud did. The eminent neurologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing, who was present at the lecture at which Freud unveiled the theory, immediately dismissed Freud's brainchild as a "a scientific fairy tale". This was, as Peter Gay says,

the very metaphor that would touch Freud at his most sensitive spot. Freud, the great man was insisting, was guilty of perpetrating mere literature. [Gay, 1978: 53]

We should not suppose that this spot became any less sensitive after Freud scrapped the seduction theory, and replaced it with the range of theses - child sexuality, the determinacy of unconscious wishes, the Oedipus complex - that he grouped under the name psychoanalysis. Freud's mature theories were not noticeably more grounded in rigorous empiricism than his "fairy-tale" had been, and the cries that Freud was a mere philosopher did not abate.

So to mention Freudianism in the same breath as the names of Wilde and Nietzsche was to press on what remained, in 1910, an exquisitely "sensitive spot" for Freud. Indeed, it was to press on it with

⁶Earlier still, Freud had made another contribution to "science" which he subsequently came to recognise as fictional: a paper identifying cocaine as an unconditionally beneficial drug [see Webster, 1995: 45-48].

cruel precision - for Nietzsche was the very philosopher to whom Freud was most commonly likened. Again and again Freud was obliged to deny that psychoanalysis had been influenced by Nietzsche. In 1908, for example, he had to reassure even the Viennese Psychoanalytical Society on this point. The minutes of April 1 record that:

Professor Freud stresses above all his peculiar relation to philosophy, the abstractions of which were so uncongenial that he decided to give up the study of philosophy. Of Nietzsche, too, he is ignorant; an occasional attempt to read him foundered upon an excess of interest. Despite the much-noted similarities he could still assure us, he said, that Nietzsche's thoughts had had absolutely no influence upon his own works....⁷ [quoted by Weber, 1984: 41]

Freud's writings contain several such strange equivocations on the subject of Nietzsche. As Derrida wryly says, when discussing the free associations of the 'Jung' woman, "Nietzsche is also a name that Freud would have very much liked to forget" [Derrida, 1984: 31n]. Freud was no doubt telling the truth when he insisted that his theories had not derived directly from the remarkably similar ideas of Nietzsche. But that is not the end of the matter. It is only the beginning of it. It leaves us with a large question: why, if Freud did not obtain his theories straight from Nietzsche, were their works so full of similar ideas? There is the possibility that Nietzsche was a brilliant amateur scientist who was able

⁷Peter Gay reports that Freud "read [Nietzsche] as a young student and spent good money on his collected works in early 1900, the year of Nietzsche's death. He hoped, he told his friend Fliess, 'to find the words for much that remains mute in me.' Yet Freud treated Nietzsche's writings as texts to be resited far more than to be studied. It is symptomatic that after reporting the purchase of Nietzsche's works, he immediately added that he had not yet opened them: 'For the time being too indolent'" [Gay, 1988: 45].

to discover universal psychological truths without systematically studying so much as one patient. This is the explanation favoured by Freud, who in the *Autobiographical Study* calls Nietzsche a “philosopher whose guesses and intuitions often agree in the most astonishing way with the laborious findings of psychoanalysis” [1950c: 109-110] (Nietzsche, it will be noticed, *agrees with* Freud, even though Freud came after him.)

There is a second and far more interesting possibility, which takes note of the fact that although Nietzsche came first, he did not come first by much. Nietzsche was born in 1844, Freud in 1856. The fact that Nietzsche died young tends to obscure the fact that he and Freud were more or less contemporaries. But once we recall that they were, we can see that the similarities between their ideas might be explained as a function of the historical climate they shared. The forgotten psychiatrist himself, Carl Jung, would advance this very argument in 1933, well after his acrimonious split from Freud.

The historical conditions which preceded Freud and formed his groundwork made a phenomenon like himself necessary, and it is precisely his main thesis, that is, the doctrine of the *repression of sexuality*, which is most clearly conditioned in this historical sense. Freud stands like his greater, philosophical, contemporary, Nietzsche, at the end of the Victorian era which, on the continent, never received such an appropriate epithet, despite the fact that it was just as characteristic in Germanic and Protestant countries generally, as among Anglo-Saxons.⁸ The Victorian era was a period of repression, a convulsive attempt to keep artificially alive by moralisings, anaemic ideals framed in a bourgeois

⁸This broad definition of “Victorianism”, which acknowledges that the repressive social conditions characteristic of Victorian Britain also prevailed beyond its borders, is one I shall be employing throughout this thesis.

respectability.... If Freud is viewed in this retrospective way, as an exponent of the *ressentiment* of the incoming century against the nineteenth, with its illusions, its hypocrisy, its half-ignorance, its false, overwrought feelings, its shallow morality, its artificial, sapless morality, and its lamentable taste, he can be viewed in my opinion much more correctly than when the attempt is made to mark him out as the herald of new ways and new truths. He is a great destroyer who breaks the chains of the past. [Jung, 1983: 49-50, 51]

It is my view that Jung's verdict is profoundly correct, and can be proved so by a consideration of the remarkable extent to which Freud's ideas were also present in the literature of his 'decadent' contemporaries. That is the task to which this thesis will be devoted. The effect will be to historicise the doctrines of psychoanalysis: to show that Freud mistook certain socially-conditioned peculiarities of the Victorian mind for permanent structural features of human psychology.

Oscar Wilde, the other creative writer mentioned by the Jung woman, is the perfect figure with whom to begin this project. Wilde was born in 1854, only two years before Freud, and it is not hard to see how his work and life reflected the atmosphere of crumbling Victorianism that Jung describes. In response to Victorian hypocrisies Wilde developed a creed of amoral individualism whose Nietzschean quality was perceived by, among others, his contemporaries Bernard Shaw and André Gide [Shaw, 1969: 63; Gide, 1969: 33]. Thomas Mann, in a late essay on Nietzsche, was another who found it fruitful to compare Nietzsche and Wilde. "Not for nothing have I coupled the names of Nietzsche and Wilde - they belong together as rebels," Mann says [Mann, 1969: 171].

More importantly, he detects striking similarities in the substance of their ideas:

When Wilde declares: 'For, try as we may, we cannot get behind the appearance of things to reality. And the terrible reason may be that there is no reality in things apart from their experiences'...; when he calls truth something so personal that the same truth can never be recognised by two different minds; when he says: 'Every impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the mind and poisons us.... The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it'... we cannot help seeing that all these quotations might have come from Nietzsche. [Mann, 1969: 169]

There is another thinker from whom such insights might have come, indeed did come: Sigmund Freud. On the difficulty of penetrating beyond one's impressions to reality, consider Freud's proposition that objects can only ever be apprehended through the selfish filter of the id, so that "[o]nly for the rarest and best adjusted mind does it seem possible to preserve the picture of external reality, as it is perceived, against the distortion to which it is normally subjected in its passage through the psychical individuality of the percipient" [Freud, 1966: 229]. On the poisonous character of instinct, consider Freud's dictum that "in a neurosis the ego ... suppresses a piece of the id (of instinctual life)" [SE, 19: 183]. And on the related proposition that the only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it, consider Freud's teaching that "temptations do but increase under constant privation, whereas they subside, at any rate temporarily, if they are sometimes gratified" [1949a: 109].

The connections between Freud and Nietzsche are well-documented. So are the connections between Nietzsche and Wilde. But

as far as I know, no sustained attention has been devoted to the proliferation of Freudian ideas in the work of Wilde. But such an investigation is worth conducting, for it will provide us with a sharp demonstration, every bit as sharp as a comparison of Freud with Nietzsche, of the historically-specific nature of Freud's ideas. Moreover, Wilde's work provides a convenient avenue through which we can approach the larger issue of Freud's proximity to the whole literature of the decadence.⁹ "It is interesting," Freud wrote to Wilhelm Fliess in 1897,

that the [scientific] literature is now turning so much to the psychology of children. Today I received another book on the subject.... So one always remains a child of his age, even in what one deems one's very own. [Masson, 1985: 277]

An inspection of Freudian themes in the work of Wilde, to which I shall now turn, will begin to show us that literature can prove Freud a child of his age in a far deeper way than he feared.

⁹On the use of the term "decadent" to designate that movement in literature of which Wilde's writings were a part, see my discussion at the beginning of Chapter Two, page 95.

ONE

"A new Hedonism": Freud, Wilde, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

After turning up in the early *Psychopathology*, Oscar Wilde's name occurs only once more in the *Standard Edition* of Freud's works. In his 1919 essay on 'The Uncanny', Freud writes:

Even a real ghost, as in Oscar Wilde's *Canterville Ghost*, loses all power of arousing at any rate an uncanny horror in us as soon as the author begins to amuse himself at its expense and allows liberties to be taken with it. Thus we see how independent emotional effects can be of the actual subject-matter in the world of fiction. [1950g: 407]

Freud has nothing especially Freudian to tell us about Wilde here. While his essay as a whole seeks to establish the unconscious basis of uncanny phenomena, Freud does not consider Wilde's story uncanny - and so Wilde is, in this context at least, beyond the reach of psychoanalytic theory. Freud can offer only observation untainted by speculation. Despite or because of this, he is able to say several indisputably valid things about Wilde: that he was a writer of fiction; that his principal goal, perhaps even his only goal, was the attainment of effects; and that the effect he was most interested in attaining was amusement, of himself and thereby of his audience.

In a word, Wilde was funny. On the face of it, this is not a very profound revelation. But it is a truth which specialist commentators on Wilde do not always recognise. In the case of 'The Canterville Ghost', the point that Wilde is a humorist is not hard to grasp; no critic has ever mistaken it for a serious ghost story. But when it comes to Wilde's main business, the deconstruction of the morals of his age, many critics become blind to Wilde's humour, and read him as a would-be moral philosopher who must be scolded for his lack of intellectual rigour. Graham Hough, for example, complains that "Willean aestheticism was little more than a series of attitudes and undigested notions, held together for the time by what must once have been a brilliant and attractive personality" [Hough, 1961: 203]. *Precisely*, Wilde would no doubt have answered. What else but the author's personality could be expected to hold together a philosophy which maintained that "A truth ceases to be true when more than one person believes in it"; and that "In all important matters, style, not sincerity, is the essential"; and that "Consistency is the last refuge of the unimaginative" [Wilde, 1988: 1205 and Schmidgall, 1994: 17]? In 'De Profundis', Wilde defined himself, aptly, as an artist "the quality of whose work depends on the intensification of personality" [Hart-Davis, 1986: 154]. If you do not think that Wilde's personality, at those moments in his writings when this intensification is achieved, *remains* brilliant and attractive, then there is little point in reading his work at all.

When misread as a philosopher, Wilde is bound to come across as a poor person's Nietzsche. That is evidently what Thomas Mann thought of him; when crediting Wilde for the Nietzschean quality of his insights, Mann felt obliged to qualify his praise by adding: "Of course there is something almost sacrilegious about the juxtaposition of Nietzsche and Wilde, for the latter was a dandy, the German philosopher a kind of saint of immoralism" [Mann, 1969: 170]. This is less a comment

on the respective merits of Wilde and Nietzsche than it is a statement of Mann's somewhat arbitrary preference for philosophy over art as a mode of immoralism. It would be absurd to condemn Nietzsche on the ground that he raises few belly laughs; it seems equally silly to condemn Wilde for his lack of intellectual weight. Wilde assaulted the morality of his age using techniques fundamentally incomparable to Nietzsche's, but the assault was in the end perhaps just as effective. He "made dying Victorianism laugh at itself," said Richard Le Gallienne, "and it may be said to have died of the laughter" [quoted by Schmidgall, 1994: 7].

A far more telling criticism of Wilde is that he was erratic where it mattered, in the quality of his art. One is sometimes obliged to read Wilde, particularly the early Wilde, as Freud reads a dream, sifting the unsatisfactory whole for its valuable verbal parts. 'The Canterville Ghost', as it happens, is a welcome exception to this principle - it is one of the few pieces in his *oeuvre* in which a distinctively Wildean effect is achieved by the work as a whole, rather than at the merely local level of the one-liner. Wilde's last play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, is another such success - it is generally hailed as the work in which Wilde finally found a form appropriate to his content. Bernard Shaw disagreed with that general verdict - "Clever as it was," he wrote, "it was his first really heartless play" [Shaw, 1969: 95] - but in doing so he put his finger on precisely the quality that made others think of *Earnest* as an advance. By lacking a heart, it delivered at the formal level the anarchic assault on convention that Wilde's epigrams had always threatened. Before, their amoral message had been stifled by the conventional, melodramatic narratives in which they had been embedded. But with *Earnest*, as W. H. Auden said, Wilde managed to "subordinate every other dramatic

element to dialogue for its own sake and create a verbal universe in which the characters are determined by the kinds of things they say, and the plot is nothing but a succession of opportunities to say them" [Auden, 1969: 136].

More often than not, though, Wilde was unable to sustain the aesthetic voltage for the duration of an entire work. This was a shortcoming to which he privately confessed. "It bores me so much, writing!" Wilde told Gide. "Would you like to know the great drama of my life? - It's that I've put my genius into my life; I've put only my talent into my works" [Gide, 1969: 34n]. It follows that the best moments in Wilde's works come when he raids his life, steals his own table-talk, and unceremoniously places it into the mouths of his *dramatis personae*. As the cliché goes, Wilde was his own best character. His next-best characters were those who functioned as stand-ins for himself¹ - Lord Henry in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Lord Darlington in *Lady Windemere's Fan*, or Jack in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The *bon mot* was Wilde's ideal medium. To recognise this is not to denigrate him as an artist; it is simply to predicate our assessment of his work on a proper understanding of what kind of artist he was.

But if Wilde's favourite medium was a frivolous one, his favourite target was impressively substantial. The bulk of his humour deals, more or less directly, with the morality of his age.

It is absurd to divide people into good and bad. People are either charming or tedious. [Wilde, 1980: 11]

¹One salient exception to this rule is the formidable Lady Bracknell, whose philosophies are wholly antithetical to Wilde's.

Morality is simply the attitude we adopt towards people whom we personally dislike. [1983b: 207]

A man who moralises is usually a hypocrite, and a woman who moralises is invariably plain. [1980: 63]

Wickedness is a myth invented by good people to account for the curious attractiveness of others. [1988: 1205]

The first three lines are spoken by characters in Wilde's plays; the final one comes from a series of epigrams published under Wilde's own name. That distinction is, as I have argued, far less important than it is in the case of most writers. Whether uttered in Wilde's own name or through the thin disguise of a character, each joke carries the profoundly subversive message that the moral codes which were so central to Victorian society were an utter fiction. This seems to be a serious point. Those who dismiss Wilde as an intellectual lightweight would no doubt maintain that it is only a serious point if it is argued in a serious way. But in certain respects Wilde's frivolous tone was perfectly suited to his subversive message. Aren't his arguments in favour of moral irresponsibility enhanced by the flippancy with which he states them? Isn't a disintegrative, anarchic, individualist ethic more appropriately conveyed by a verbal shard than by a cogently argued essay? As we shall see in the next chapter, Wilde was certainly not the only writer of his age to utter a subversive message in a fragmentary verbal form.²

²"A style of decadence," wrote Paul Bourget, "is one in which the unity of the book is decomposed to give place to the independence of the page, in which the page is decomposed to give place to the independence of the phrase, and the phrase to give place to the independence of the word [quoted by Chamberlin, 1985: 284]."

Moreover, the nature of the truths Wilde sought to expose made an oblique approach almost mandatory. Nietzsche himself, whom nobody would accuse of lacking intellectual substance, favoured the aphorism as a weapon against morality, and defended his method thus:

I approach deep problems like cold baths: quickly into them and quickly out again. That one does not get to the depths that way, not deep enough down, is the superstition of those afraid of the water, the enemies of cold water.... And to ask this incidentally: does a matter necessarily remain ununderstood and unfathomed merely because it has been touched only in flight, glanced at, in a flash? Is it absolutely imperative that one settles down on it? that one has brooded over it as over an egg? *Diu noctuque incubando*, as Newton said of himself? At least there are truths that are singularly shy and ticklish and cannot be caught except suddenly - that must be *surprised* or left alone. [Nietzsche, 1989: 197]

If even Nietzsche felt compelled to get out of the bath quickly, imagine the degree of nimbleness required of Wilde - who wanted not only to surprise the same truths, but to gain wide public acclaim at the same time. Wit, the form of brevity Wilde favoured, was no doubt the only way of doing both things at once: it was the Trojan Horse in which he could smuggle amorality into the popular theatre, whose gates were patrolled by that embodiment of Victorian narrow-mindedness, the Lord Chamberlain. Under the provisions of the Theatres Act of 1843, as Kenneth Tynan explains,

anything previously unperformed must be submitted to the 'Malvolio of St James's Palace' (Bernard Shaw's phrase) at least a

week before opening night.... His Lordship can impose a ban 'whenever he shall be of opinion that it is fitting for the Preservation of Good Manners, Decorum, or of the Public Peace'. [Tynan, 1984: 366]

"The arch-fiends," Tynan goes on to say, "were Ibsen and Shaw - social critics who brutally exposed the hypocrisies of official morality and their destructive effect on personal relationships. Both suffered from the censor's gag" [Tynan, 1984: 383].

The Lord Chamberlain refused a licence to Wilde's humourless *Salomé*.³ And yet Wilde's funny plays, which contained lines far more subversive than anything to be found in his sterile Biblical drama, all slipped through the censor's net. The possibility that Wilde's jokes were merely jokes allowed him to achieve, temporarily at least, the difficult trick of getting society to pay good money to hear its values subjected to the utmost ridicule. Perhaps, indeed, Wilde ridiculed the morals of his day a little too successfully. He so effectively persuades us of their absurdity⁴ that we forget how dangerous they still were, so that it almost comes as a surprise to us - as it did to him - that these ludicrous conventions retained their bite. "How I used to toy with that tiger Life!" he remarked, re-reading *The Importance of Being Earnest* after his release from prison [Hart-Davis, 1986: 348]. Even when in the dock, Wilde showed an alarming incapacity to take his situation seriously; his verbal sallies evoked much mirth from the public gallery, but the last laugh was had by the Crown [see the trial transcripts in Hyde, 1973]. The judge at his

³Not under the Act of 1843, but under "an old law that forbade the depiction on the stage of Biblical characters" [Ellmann, 1988: 351].

⁴Some moral conventions were so self-evidently absurd that they can raise a laugh even without Wilde's gloss. Consider the comment made in all seriousness by Wilde's own brother, Willie, after Oscar had been convicted of gross homosexual indecency. "Oscar was *not* a man of bad character: you could have trusted him with a woman anywhere" [Shaw, 1969: 96].

second trial called Wilde's "the worst case I have ever tried", and lamented his inability to impose a harsher sentence than the maximum one permitted by the law: two years with hard labour [Ellmann, 1988: 448].

"What the paradox was to me in the sphere of thought, perversity became to me in the sphere of passion," Wilde wrote in 'De Profundis' [Hart-Davis, 1986: 194]. This confirms the point that Wilde's witticisms trod, with considerably more success, the same dangerous ground tested by his physical transgressions. Where his paradoxes brought him fame, his "perversity" brought ruination, suggesting that lightly was the safest, perhaps the only, way to tread. "If you tell people the truth," as Bernard Shaw said, "make them laugh or they'll kill you" [quoted by Pierpont, 1996: 106]. This dictum cuts sadly close to the bone in the case of Wilde.

Was it co-incidental, or was it no accident, that this century which Kenneth Tynan spoke of as "the censor's paradise and playground" [372] was also the century in whose dusk Sigmund Freud proposed the existence of an internal censor, a psychic agency devoted to the suppression of any thoughts unfitting for the Preservation of Good Manners, Decorum, or of the Public Peace? In 1897, the year in which the broken Wilde was released from prison, Freud wrote to his friend Wilhelm Fliess:

Have you ever seen a foreign newspaper which passed Russian censorship at the frontier? Words, whole clauses and sentences are blacked out so that the rest becomes unintelligible. A *Russian censorship* of that kind comes about in psychoses and produces the

apparently meaningless *deliria*." [Masson, 1985: 289; see also McGrath, 1986: 246]⁵

At this early stage, it will be noticed, Freud's notions about internal censorship pertained only to the psychical processes of the mentally ill. But as Freud broadened his theories about hysteria into a general psychology, he came to believe that a censor of this kind dwelt in all minds, sick or well, presiding over the production of everyday (or everynight) phenomena like dreams, slips of the tongue, jokes. In a part of our minds inaccessible to our conscious scrutiny, Freud proposed, we harbour a rabble of scandalous desires; an internal Lord Chamberlain who prevents their free expression; and an agency (the dream-work, the joke-work) which is capable of smuggling them past him by disguising them in forms which combine the verbal wit of a Wilde with the

⁵In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud draws another interesting parallel between his theories about censorship and the political atmosphere of his age: "if this picture of the two psychical agencies and their relation to consciousness is accepted, there is a complete analogy in political life.... I transpose myself into the life of a state in which a struggle is in process between a ruler who is jealous of his power and an alert public opinion. The people are in revolt against an unpopular official and demand his dismissal" [quoted by McGrath, 1986: 248]. William J. McGrath, citing this passage in his book *Freud's Discovery of Psychoanalysis: The Politics of Hysteria*, notes that "This example paralleled the near revolutionary political situation threatening the [Austrian] Badeni government during its final days, and since it is possible to date the development of Freud's idea of a dream censor to the months immediately following the climax of the crisis, the example and the other political references in his theory suggest that his intellectual work received an impetus from these political events..." [McGrath, 1986: 248]. But of course one's suspicions that Freud's intellectual work received an impetus from his political environment do not have to take so specific a form as this, since the Badeni government was far from being the only authority under challenge during those turbulent times.

Benedict Simon, in his 1978 book *Mind and Madness in Ancient Greece*, responds on Freud's behalf to suspicions of this kind. "*The Interpretation of Dreams* ... is replete with political, social, and economic analogies. For instance, the dream censor operates like the postal censor. Psychic agency is an agency in the same sense as a government bureau.... [B]ut it is misleading to think of the political structure as the basic model for the structure of the mind primarily because the political structure is itself a product of the mind - of minds that structure and construe the facts of social life in terms of a particular schema" [Simon, 1978: 209]. The principal flaw of Simon's argument is obvious. If social and political structures are products of an immutable mental "schema", then why do those structures fluctuate over time, as they patently do? Rampant censorship is by no means a permanent feature of public life. But it was certainly a feature of the moment when Freud "discovered" the "fact" that rampant censorship was a permanent feature of mental life.

symbolist ingenuity of a Rimbaud. On the face of it this is a far-fetched idea, and its improbability has given rise to certain fundamental objections to psychoanalysis.⁶ Even the generally credulous Wilhelm Fliess, who believed that human health was governed by the nose,⁷ evidently felt that the degree of cleverness that Freud imputed to the unconscious was implausibly high. In 1899, Fliess's comments on some proofs of *The Interpretation of Dreams* provoked the following response from Freud:

It is certainly true that the dreamer is too ingenious and amusing, but it is not my fault, and I cannot be reproached with it. All dreamers are insufferably witty, and they have to be, because they are under pressure, and the direct way is barred to them.... The ostensible wit of all unconscious processes is closely connected with the theory of jokes and humour. [A. Freud, 1954: 297]

The remarks in Freud's letter to Fliess were, James Strachey tells us, one of the factors which prompted Freud to compose, five years later, a study exclusively devoted to the phenomenon of wit - *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, first published in 1905 [Strachey, 1960: 4]. This is not the place to unravel the complexities of Freud's theory of jokes.⁸ But it is worth quoting a passage from the *Jokes* book which

⁶Ernest Gellner, for example, complained that "The curious fact is that psychoanalysis is a homunculus theory. (By this is meant a psychological theory which 'explains' some human competence or capacity by an inner self, which is supplied by the inner, physiological self with its data....) Further selves are assumed to lurk within us, which are then anthropomorphically credited with human competence(s).

"The circularity and unsatisfactoriness of this kind of explanation is obvious and well known." [Gellner, 1993: 95]

⁷See Gay, 1988: 56, 57; Webster, 1995: 220-222.

⁸The *Jokes* book appears to have been a kind of bastard child for Freud. James Strachey in his 'Preface' to it points out that while Freud's other works of the period - *The Interpretation of Dreams*, *The Psychopathology* and the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* - "were all of them expanded and modified almost out of recognition in their later editions", only "half-a-dozen small additions were made to the *Jokes* when it

introduces us to a concept intimately connected with the process of internal censorship: the concept of repression. Freud is explaining the unconscious purpose of jokes, using sexually obscene humour as a kind of paradigm:

Jokes ... make possible the satisfaction of an instinct (whether lustful or hostile) in the face of an obstacle that stands in its way. They circumvent this obstacle and in that way draw pleasure from a source which the obstacle had made inaccessible. The obstacle standing in the way [in the case of smutty jokes] is in reality nothing other than women's incapacity to tolerate undisguised sexuality, an incapacity correspondingly increased with a rise in the educational and social level.... The power which makes it difficult or impossible for women, and to a lesser degree for men as well, to enjoy undisguised obscenity is termed by us 'repression'; and we recognise in it the same psychical processes which, in cases of serious illness, keeps whole complexes of impulses, together with their derivatives, away from consciousness, and which has turned out to be the main factor in the causation of what are known as psychoneuroses. It is our belief that civilization and higher education have a large influence in the development of repression, and we suppose that, under such conditions, the psychical organization undergoes an alteration (that can also emerge as an inherited disposition) as a result of which what was formerly felt as agreeable now seems unacceptable and is rejected

reached its second edition in 1912, but no further changes were ever made in it." Strachey considers this significant, and offers this explanation: "It seems possible that this is related to the fact that this book lies somewhat apart from the rest of Freud's writings. He himself may have taken this view of it. His references to it in other works are few; in the *Introductory Lectures* he speaks of its having temporarily led him aside from his path; and in the *Autobiographical Study*, there is even what looks like a slightly depreciatory reference to it" [Strachey, 1960: 5-6; the depreciatory reference is in SE, 20: 65-66].

with all possible psychological force. The repressive activity of civilization brings it about that primary possibilities of enjoyment, which have now, however, been repudiated by the censorship in us, are lost to us. But to the human psyche all renunciation is exceedingly difficult, and so we find that tendentious jokes provide a means of undoing the renunciation and undoing what was lost. [Freud, 1991c: 144-145]

Freud would later call repression "the foundation-stone on which the whole structure of psychoanalysis rests, the most essential part of it..." [1950m: 297-8]. On the basis of that pronouncement and others like it, one would assume that the theory of "repression" is revolutionarily different from the observation that a person's social environment can inhibit the free play of his or her desires. After all, we hardly needed Freud to tell us of the existence of that kind of censorship. But in the passage quoted above, Freud defines "repression" as "the power which makes it difficult or impossible for women, and to a lesser degree for men as well, to enjoy undisguised obscenity". It hardly needs to be pointed out that men and women differ in this respect - or did in Freud's age - because of cultural conditioning, and not because of some biological law which applies across all cultures and all times. Nor is it hard to see how a social force which can make women *more* modest than men might well be responsible for the *whole phenomenon* of modesty. It is certainly not impossible to imagine a culture in which both men and women *do* enjoy undisguised obscenity - it could even be argued that such a society has already been achieved. In any case, the point is that repression, the "foundation-stone of psychoanalysis", seems to amount, at least as Freud defines it here, to little more than a synonym for the commonly

understood force of social inhibition.⁹ This of course opens up the possibility that Freud's theory of repression was inspired by the socially

⁹Freud offers a similarly shallow definition of repression in 1895, in connection with his seduction theory: "shame and morality are the repressing forces..." he wrote to Fliess in the year. "Where there is no shame (as in a male person), or where no morality comes about (as in the lower classes of society), or where disgust is blunted by the conditions of life (as in the country), there too no repression and therefore no neurosis will result from sexual stimulation in infancy. I fear, nevertheless, that this explanation will not stand up to deeper examination" [Masson, 1985: 163-164].

After abandoning the seduction theory, Freud developed theories in which repression was accorded a role of far greater significance: it was no longer the underlying cause merely of neurosis, but also of a range of "normal" mental activities as well, such as dreams. Everybody has dreams, even lower class people who live in the country, and so Freud's mature theories would seem to have - in contrast to the seduction theory of neurosis - no room for cases in which "no repression" occurs. And yet Freud offers, in the *Introductory Lectures*, an account of repression which seems very close to the 1895 one, and open to the same objections:

In order to demonstrate the effect of the development of the ego upon the tendency to conflict and therewith upon the causation of the neurosis, I will quote an example which, although entirely imaginary, is not at all improbable in any respect. I will give it the title of Nestroy's farce: *On the Ground-Floor and in the Mansion*. Suppose that a caretaker is living on the ground-floor of a house, while the owner, a rich and well-connected man, lives above. They both have children, and we will assume that the owner's little girl is permitted to play freely without supervision with the child of lower standing. It may then very easily happen that their games become 'naughty,' that is, take on a sexual character: that they play 'father and mother,' watch each other in the performance of intimate acts, and stimulate each other's genital parts. The caretaker's daughter may have played the temptress in this, since in spite of her five or six years she has been able to learn a great deal about sexual matters. These occurrences, even though they are only kept up for a short period, will be enough to rouse certain sexual excitations in both children which will come to expression in the practice of masturbation for a few years, after the games have been discontinued. There is common ground so far, but the final result will be very different in the two children. The caretaker's daughter will continue masturbation, perhaps up to the onset of menstruation, and then give it up without difficulty; a few years later will find a lover, perhaps bear a child; choose this or that path in life, perhaps become a popular actress and end as an aristocrat. Probably her career will turn out less brilliantly, but in any case she will be unharmed by the premature sexual activity, free from neurosis, and able to live her life. Very different is the result in the other child. She will very soon, while yet a child, acquire a sense of having done wrong; after a fairly short time she will give up the masturbatory satisfaction, though perhaps only with a tremendous struggle, but will nevertheless retain an inner feeling of subdued depression. When later on as a young girl she comes to learn something of sexual intercourse, she will turn from it with inexplicable horror and wish to remain ignorant. Probably she will then again suffer a fresh irresistible impulse to masturbation about which she will not dare to unburden herself to anyone. When the time comes for a man to choose her as a wife the neurosis will break out and cheat her out of marriage and the joy of life. If analysis makes it possible to obtain an insight into this neurosis, it will be found that this well-brought-up, intelligent and idealistic girl has completely repressed her sexual desires; but that they are, unconsciously, attached to the few little experiences she had with the childish play-mate.

repressive conditions of his age, and has little or no validity beyond that age.

But while Freud certainly considered social repression and psychological repression to be closely related, he did not consider them synonymous. His concept of repression is meant to amount to far more than the banal (but incontestably true) proposition that society - particularly during the Victorian era - imposes certain barriers that oblige one to hold one's tongue. Yes, Freud admitted, a harshly oppressive moral environment like the Victorian one could make for a greater *intensity* of repression.¹⁰ But fundamentally one's moral environment was neither here nor there, for there is a certain substantial core of repression which is a constant, and which will occur even in the most liberated of societies. Repression, as Freud saw it, afflicted not only himself and his contemporaries, but also Sophocles, Shakespeare, Leonardo, and every civilized human being since the band of parricidal brothers whose existence he posits in *Totem and Taboo*.

To understand why Freud believed this, we need to turn our attention to another sentence from the passage quoted above. "It is our belief that civilization and higher education have a large influence in the development of repression, and we suppose that, under such conditions, the psychical organization undergoes an alteration (*that can also emerge as an inherited disposition*)" [emphasis added]. By means of the italicised phrase, Freud explains how an inconstant form of social conditioning

The differences which ensue in these two destinies in spite of the common experiences undergone, arise because in one girl the ego has sustained a development absent in the other. To the caretaker's daughter sexual activity seemed as natural and harmless in later years as in childhood. The gentleman's daughter had been well-brought-up and had adopted the standards of her education. Thus stimulated, her ego had formed ideals of womanly purity and absence of desire that were incompatible with sexual acts; her intellectual training had caused her to depreciate the feminine role for which she is intended. This higher moral and intellectual development in her ego had brought her into conflict with the claims of her sexuality. [Freud, 1940: 296-297]

¹⁰See, for example, "'Civilized' Sexual Morality and Modern Nervousness".

like higher education can infiltrate the psyche at a profound level, effecting a permanent structural change in mental organisation.¹¹ But the italicised phrase embodies a doctrine that even in Freud's day was not generally considered to be sound: namely, the Lamarckian theory that acquired characteristics can be inherited. Peter Gay, who calls Lamarckianism "one of [Freud's] most eccentric and least defensible intellectual commitments", points out that "few reputable biologists of the time were willing to credit, and few analysts felt at all comfortable with, this thesis. But Freud stayed with it" [1988: 290n].

In the context of our present discussion, it is not hard to see why Freud did stay with it. "[S]cientific work," he once revealingly said, "is not satisfied with establishing a departure from the norm" [1950i: 342-344]. Repressive Victorian ethics, and the varieties of behaviour they produced, were a departure from the norm. It was the job of mere sociologists, or creative writers like Wilde, to deal with them. The repression of which Freud spoke *was* the norm, at least as he saw it: it was a fundamental force in all human mental activity. It was not to be confused with the mere ripples of psychological discomfort caused by cultural vicissitudes. Lamarckian doctrine was a mechanism by which a departure from the norm could *become* the norm. It allowed Freud to take processes typical of an individual's interaction with society - sexual desire, the curbing of sexual desire, subjection to censorship, evasion of censorship - and transplant them to an entirely new realm, deep inside the individual's mind.

Lamarckian doctrine, as I have pointed out, is a flimsy instrument with which to attempt such a massive endeavour. But Freud had

¹¹"Far from setting out radically to subvert the values of Judaeo-Christian asceticism which were deeply internalised in his own culture," as Richard Webster puts it in his book *Why Freud was Wrong*, "Freud made the Lamarckian assumption that such asceticism had become part of our biological inheritance, so that it now belonged to our very nature" [Webster, 1995: 4].

another way of asserting the universality of repression: his own doctrine of the Oedipus complex. This theory posits the innateness of two sinister instincts: sexual desire for the parent of the opposite sex, and jealous hostility toward the parent of the same sex. Not even the most liberated of societies could possibly allow such drives to cavort freely; and so every individual, regardless of his or her cultural situation, must suffer, as an infant, wholesale repression of his or her most fundamental desires. It is this momentous act of repression - endured by Sophocles, Shakespeare, Leonardo, and Victorian alike - which forms the unconscious.

Thus does the theory of the Oedipus complex assure us that repression is *not* a form of psychological suffering exclusive to morally repressive cultures like those which produced Nietzsche, Wilde, Freud. But the theory of the Oedipus complex no more stands above the suspicion that it was a mere product of Freud's age than the theory of repression does. In my third chapter, I will examine the ways in which the destructive component of the Oedipus complex - the male's hostility to his father - reproduced certain political features of the time. As for the other half of the complex, it is eminently possible to argue that Freud ascribed such overwhelming importance to sexuality only because the harsh Victorian taboos to which he and his patients were subject had grotesquely magnified the role of sex in human affairs. A person who lives in a straitjacket will no doubt be tormented by a profound desire to move his or her arms, but one would be rash to conclude on that basis that a profound desire to move the arms is the paramount motive of all human activity. Carl Jung attacks Freud along these lines when he protests that "a theory of neurosis or a theory of dreams based on a Victorian prejudice is at the most of very secondary import to science":

[T]he human soul is not just a product of the *Zeitgeist*; it is a thing of far greater persistence and immutability. The 'nineteenth century' is a merely local and passing phenomenon, which has only deposited a relatively thin layer of dust on the age-old soul of mankind. But if this layer is wiped off, if our professional eye-glasses are once cleaned, what shall we see then? How shall we look upon the soul, and how shall we explain a neurosis? The problem presents itself to every practitioner whose cases are not cured even after all the childhood sexual experiences have been dug up, and all the cultural values dissected into bad elements.... A general psychological theory which lays claim to being scientific must not found itself on the malformations of the nineteenth century, and a theory of neurosis must also be capable of explaining hysteria among the Maoris. As soon as the sexual theory leaves the field of the special psychology of neuroses and reaches out into other fields, as for example that of primitive psychology, its one-sidedness and inadequacy leap to the eye. Views which have been developed out of the observation of Viennese neuroses between 1890 and 1920 prove themselves poor tools when applied to problems of totem and taboo, even when the application is made in a very clever way. Freud has not penetrated into that deeper layer of what is common to all humanity. [Jung, 1983: 52-53, 55-56]

Jung's distinction between the human soul and the layer deposited on it by the nineteenth century brings us back to a major thematic preoccupation of Wilde's. We can examine this theme in Wilde, and its relation to Freud's concept of repression, by turning to Wilde's only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which first appeared in 1890.

Freud as Mephistopheles: Psychoanalysis and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

During Oscar Wilde's ill-fated libel action against the Marquis of Queensbury, Queensbury's counsel recited portions of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to the court in an effort to establish Wilde's immorality. On the following day, passages from the same book were read out by Wilde's own counsel as evidence of his client's rectitude. [Hyde, 1973: 99, 136]. One could hardly ask for a sharper indication of the moral ambivalence of Wilde's only novel. In light of that ambivalence, one might have hoped that only a lawyer would see fit to read the novel as a flatly moral or a flatly immoral tract. But literary critics, too, have tended to think of the book as standing either at one or the other moral pole. Upon its original publication in *Lipincott's Monthly Magazine* of July 1890, Wilde's tale was attacked by one representative reviewer for being "false to morality - for it is not made sufficiently clear that the writer does not prefer a course of unnatural iniquity to a life of cleanliness, health and sanity. The story ... deals with matters only fitted for the Criminal Investigation Department or a hearing *in camera* ..." [Hart-Davis, 1986: 81n2]. The *St James's Gazette* agreed, deeming Wilde's novel a matter for the police, not for the critic [Ellmann, 1988: 303n].

Modern critics, on the other hand, have tended to read the novel as a straightforward - too straightforward - condemnation of moral delinquency. In the opinion of Graham Hough, for example, "Wilde

simply tells us that conscious cultivation of the senses leads to ruin, in a manner as flat, as perfunctory, as remote from anything that he really believed as any bourgeois journalist's attack on aestheticism" [Hough, 1961: 202]. Richard Ellmann, likewise, views the book as an exercise in moral didacticism: for him it is "the aesthetic novel *par excellence*, not in espousing the doctrine, but in exhibiting its dangers" [Ellmann: 1988: 297].

To complicate matters, Wilde himself made conflicting public statements about the novel's moral orientation. On the one hand, he wrote indignant letters to the newspapers protesting that his book was, if anything, too moral. Responding to the *St James's Gazette*, for example, he replied that

it is a story with a moral. And the moral is this: All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment.... Yes; there is a terrible moral in *Dorian Gray* - a moral which the prurient will not be able to find in it, but which will be revealed to all those whose minds are healthy. Is this an artistic error? I fear it is. It is the only error in the book. [Hart-Davis, 1962: 259]

On the other hand, when the novel was ultimately published in its own right, Wilde added a 'Preface' in which he asserted, among other things, that "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book," and that "No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style" [17]. Backing away from his journalistic assertions that the book was an impeccably moral one, Wilde re-opens the possibility that it was indeed as subversive as the newspapers had feared.

Perhaps we can get to the root of the mystery via another remark Wilde made in his 'Preface': the claim that "Diversity of opinion about a

work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital" [17]. In the case of *Dorian Gray*, this proposition does not stand up particularly well. For while the book has certainly provoked diversity of opinion, it is new and vital *only in part*. Its narrative spine reproduces a centuries-old myth, that of Faust: "an idea that is old in the history of literature," as Wilde put it in a letter, "but to which I have given new form" [Hart-Davis, 1962: 263]. In other words, the novel represents a grafting of fresh, Wildean narrative elements onto a pre-existing mythical structure. These two strata of material carry separate, indeed antithetical, moral messages. The Faust myth offers us the didactic news that self-indulgence will ultimately be punished; whereas the material originating with Wilde argues, in the true aestheticist manner, that self-indulgence is the highest good.

While the journalists who attacked the novel for immorality evidently made too much of this fresh material, and ignored the countervailing propriety of the plot, it seems to me that critics who think of the book as straightforwardly moralistic make the opposite mistake: dwelling on the moral inherent in the Faustian structure¹² while ignoring the relish and the urgency with which Wilde's Mephistopheles states the decadent case.

Of course, the latter critics have on their side what looks like an unassailable argument: surely the moral message of the Faust plot *by definition* trumps the doctrines of Mephistopheles. Why else would Wilde use the Faustian structure, except to condemn those doctrines? This argument, it seems to me, fails to take into account certain facts about Oscar Wilde. First of all, the fact that he *was* Oscar Wilde. Nearly every other word Wilde wrote, before the novel and after it, celebrated

¹²"My difficulty," Wilde wrote to Conan Doyle in 1891, "was to keep the inherent moral subordinate to the artistic and dramatic effect, and it still seems to me that the moral is too obvious" [Hart-Davis, 1986: 95].

individualism. Why would Wilde want to spend a whole novel condemning the doctrine of which he was the most passionate spokesman?

And then there is that limitation of Wilde's which we have already discussed: namely, the fact that he was not the kind of artist able to make the form of a work submit holistically to his intentions. His poetry bears almost no trace of his personality. In his plays, plot was generally a ramshackle conveyance for his genuine artworks, his epigrams. In *Dorian Gray*, similarly, the distinctively Wildean touch is achieved not by the big picture, but only by certain brushstrokes. Those portions of the novel that deal with the overarching Faustian moral are melodramatic, hackneyed, and devoid of the daring wit which is the trustiest signifier of Wilde's conviction in any matter. *Dorian Gray*, Wilde's Faust, is as one-dimensional as his portrait and as colourless as his name. If the novel contained no other characters, there would be no arguing with Hough's verdict that it amounts to a "flat" and "perfunctory" delivery of the message that "conscious cultivation of the senses leads to ruin."

But the novel does contain other characters, most notably a vivid Mephistopheles whose verbal gusto looks suspiciously like that of his creator, and who tells us that conscious cultivation of the senses is the only way to go. While the Faustian moral is delivered so flatly that it is impossible to believe that Wilde's heart was in it, the Mephistophelean rhetoric is done with such verve that it is impossible to believe that his heart was *not* in it.

Wilde's Mephisto is Henry Wotton, an idle Lord whose Paterian theories lead *Dorian Gray* to utter his fateful wish for eternal youth. One might call Lord Henry a dandy, or an aesthete, or a decadent. For his part, Lord Henry thinks of himself as a scientist, a psychologist [Wilde, 1988:

55-56]. In the context of our present inquiry, this claim would seem to be worthy of our attention.

To a certain extent, perhaps, calling himself a scientist is merely a provocative pose on Lord Henry's part - for there is a certain naughty irony in using science as a weapon against bourgeois values. But there *is* something strangely scientific about the texture of Lord Henry's arguments in favour of hedonism. They have rigour as well as vigour; they have a kind of logical force which makes it doubly hard for us to believe that Lord Henry is a mere straw man whom Wilde has fashioned only as fuel for the blaze of the story's inherent moral.

Take Lord Henry's maxim that "the only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself ..." [29]. Politically this is consistent with the sentiments of Lord Darlington in *An Ideal Husband*, who declares that he can resist everything except temptation. But as Lord Henry presents it, the idea is no joke. It has the authority of a doctor's prescription: he makes it plain that the alternative to self-indulgence is illness, and so redefines the quest for pleasure as vitally necessary rather than frivolously superfluous.

This argument has an impregnable quality which the story's supposed moral lacks. That moral, as Wilde defined it in a letter to a newspaper, is that "All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment" [Hart-Davis, 1962: 259]. Lord Henry, by conceiving of self-indulgence as a health measure, alerts us to the large loophole in this moral platitude. If all *renunciation* brings its own punishment, then avoiding renunciation - that is, indulging oneself - must be a means of avoiding punishment. It can therefore scarcely be defined as a form of "excess". Excess is not really what Lord Henry recommends; nor, as we shall see, can most of the things that Dorian Gray gets up to during the

course of the novel fairly be branded excessive. Lord Henry's psychological theories do more than oppose the story's alleged moral: they actively deconstruct it. By making the quest for satisfaction scientifically inevitable, Lord Henry defuses any attempt to condemn it on moral grounds.

"[T]emptations do but increase under constant privation, whereas they subside, at any rate temporarily, if they are sometimes gratified" [1949a: 109]. Framed by Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents*, this principle is an only marginally more scientific way than Lord Henry's of saying that the only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. As we shall see in a moment, this is only one of a plethora of respects in which Lord Henry anticipates psychoanalysis. But before we consider the many areas of theoretical agreement between Freud and Lord Henry, it is worth noting that there are also curious parallels between the routes by which the two thinkers arrived at their psychologies. Lord Henry, we are told,

had always been enthralled by the methods of natural science, but the ordinary subject-matter of that science had seemed to him trivial and of no import.... Human life - that appeared to him the one thing worth investigating. Compared to it there was nothing else of any value.¹³ [Wilde, 1988: 55]

Wondering "whether we could ever make psychology so absolute a science that each little spring of life would be revealed to us" [56], Lord Henry embarks on his project in the same way that Freud did, with a

¹³Cf. the letter to Fliess of 1896 in which Freud wrote: "As a young man my only longing was for philosophical knowledge, and now that I am changing over from medicine to psychology I am in the process of fulfilling this wish" [E. Freud, 1961: 241].

course of self-analysis: "he had begun by vivisecting himself, as he had ended by vivisecting others" [55].

As for the strikingly Freudian quality of the insights which these vivisections yield, we might start with the full text of the speech from which I have already briefly quoted. The speech, which Lord Henry makes shortly after being introduced to Dorian by the painter, Basil Hallward, will "touc[h] some secret chord" [29] in the youngster. Compounded by the effect of a second speech - a "strange panegyric on youth" [34] - it will prompt Dorian to give rash voice to his readiness to trade his soul for eternal beauty.

Here is the speech:

I believe that if one man were to live out his life fully and completely, were to give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream - I believe that the world would gain such a fresh impulse of joy that we would forget all the maladies of mediævalism, and return to the Hellenic ideal - to something finer, richer than the Hellenic ideal, it may be. But the bravest man among us is afraid of himself. The mutilation of the savage has its tragic survival in the self-denial that mars our lives. We are punished for our refusals. Every impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the mind, and poisons us. The body sins once, and has done with its sin, for action is a mode of purification. Nothing remains then but the recollection of a pleasure, or the luxury of a regret. The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful. It has been said that the great events of the world take place in the brain. It is in the brain,

and the brain only, that the great sins of the world take place also. You, Mr. Gray, you yourself, with your rose-red youth and your rose-white boyhood, you have had passions that have made you afraid, thoughts that have filled you with terror, day-dreams and sleeping dreams whose mere memory might stain your cheek with shame. [29]

There are some striking anticipations of psychoanalysis here, as we can see if we juxtapose Lord Henry's remarks with some comparable formulations of Freud.

Lord Henry: *The bravest man among us is afraid of himself.*

Freud: "If the ego is obliged to admit its weakness, it breaks out in anxiety - realistic anxiety regarding the external world, moral anxiety regarding the super-ego and neurotic anxiety regarding the strength of the passions in the id." [*New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, SE, 22: 78]

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Lord Henry: *The mutilation of the savage has its tragic survival in the self-denial that mars our lives.*

Freud: "The turning back of sadism against the self regularly occurs where a *cultural suppression of the instincts* holds back a large part of the subject's destructive instinctual components from being exercised in life." [*'The Economic Problem of Masochism'* SE, 19: 170 - emphasis in original.]

*

Lord Henry: *We are punished for our refusals. Every impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the mind, and poisons us.*

Freud: "[I]n a neurosis the ego, in its dependence on reality, suppresses a piece of the id (of instinctual life).... The neurosis consists ... in the process

which provides a compensation for the portion of the id that has been damaged - that is to say, in the reaction against the repression and in the failure of the repression." ['The Loss of Reality in Neurosis and Psychosis', SE 19: 183]

*

Lord Henry: *The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it.*

Freud: "An instinct ... never acts as a momentary impact but as a constant force. As it makes its attack not from without but from within the organism, it follows that no flight can avail against it." ['Formulations Regarding the Two Principles of Mental Functioning', 1950d: 62]

*

Lord Henry: *Resist [temptation], and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful.*

Freud: "Anyone who understands how to penetrate to the factors conditioning nervous illness will soon be convinced that its increase in our society originates in the greater stringency of sexual restraint." ['Civilized Sexual Morality and Modern Nervousness', 1950j: 89]

*

Lord Henry: *It has been said that the great events of the world take place in the brain. It is in the brain, and the brain only, that the great sins of the world take place also.*

Freud: "... human nature has a far greater capacity, both for good and for evil, than it thinks it has, i.e. than it is aware of through the conscious perceptions of the ego." [*The Ego and the Id*, 1949: 76]

*

Lord Henry: *You, Mr. Gray, you yourself, with your rose-red youth and your rose-white boyhood, you have had passions that have made you*

afraid, thoughts that have filled you with terror, day-dreams and sleeping dreams whose mere memory might stain your cheek with shame.

Freud: "Whenever we sleep we cast off our hard-won morality like a garment, only to put it on again next morning. This divestiture is naturally unattended by any danger because we are paralysed, condemned to inactivity, by the state of sleep [A]ll our dreams are governed by purely egotistic motives." [*An Autobiographical Study*, 1950c: 302]

The Freudian flavour is not confined to this one speech. It remains pungent as Lord Henry elaborates his psychology during the course of the novel:

Lord Henry: "Life is not governed by will or intention. Life is a question of nerves, and fibres, and slowly built-up cells in which thought hides itself and passion has its dreams." [Wilde, 1988: 162]

Freud: "[T]hese two discoveries - that the life of the sexual instincts cannot be totally restrained, and that mental processes are in themselves unconscious and can only reach the ego and come under its control through incomplete and untrustworthy perceptions - amount to a statement that *the ego is not master in its own house*." ['One of the Difficulties of Psychoanalysis', 1950n: 355]

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Lord Henry (thinking): "Soul and body, body and soul - how mysterious they were!... Who could say where the fleshly impulse ceased, or the psychical impulse began? How shallow were the arbitrary definitions of ordinary psychologists!" [56]

Freud: "[A]n instinct appears to us as a borderland concept between the mental and the physical." ['Formulations Regarding the Two Principles of Mental Functioning', 1950d: 64]

*

Lord Henry: "Modern morality consists in accepting the standard of one's age." [69]

Freud: "[I]nstincts in themselves are neither good nor evil. We but classify them and their manifestations in that fashion, according as they meet the needs and demands of the human community." [*An Autobiographical Study* , 1950c: 295]

*

Lord Henry: "All ways end at the same point ... Disillusion." [155]

Freud: "Our possibilities of happiness are ... limited from the start by our very constitution. It is much less difficult to be unhappy." [*Civilization and its Discontents*, 1949a: 28]

*

Lord Henry: "The terror of society ... is the basis of morals." [25]

Freud: "It has long been our contention that 'dread of society [*soziale Angst*]' is the essence of what is called conscience." [*Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, 1948: 10]

*

Lord Henry: "[T]he value of an idea has nothing to do with the sincerity of the man who expresses it. Indeed, the probabilities are that the more insincere the man is, the more purely intellectual the idea will be, as in that case it will not be coloured by either his wants, his desires, or his prejudices." [23]

Freud: "[P]eople unfortunately are seldom impartial where they are concerned with the ultimate things, the great problems of science and of life. My belief is that there everyone is under the sway of preferences deeply rooted within, into the hands of which he unwittingly plays as he pursues his speculation." [*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 1942: 77]

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Lord Henry: "Pleasure is the only thing worth having a theory about But I am afraid I cannot claim my theory as my own. It belongs to Nature, not to me. Pleasure is Nature's test, her sign of approval." [69]

Freud: "In the psychoanalytical theory of the mind we take it for granted that the course of mental processes is automatically regulated by the pleasure principle." [*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 1942: 1]

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Lord Henry: "I wonder who it was defined man as a rational animal. It was the most premature definition ever given. Man is many things, but he is not rational." [36]

Freud: "[M]en are so slightly amenable to reasonable arguments, so completely are they ruled by their instinctual wishes...." [*The Future of an Illusion*, 1949c: 81-82]

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Lord Henry: "Conscience and cowardice are really the same things Conscience is the trade-name of the firm. That is all." [22]

Freud: "[T]he price we pay for our advance in civilization is a loss of happiness through the heightening of the sense of guilt. ('Thus conscience does make cowards of us all ...')" [*Civilization and its Discontents*, SE 21: 134]

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Lord Henry (thinking): "It was the passions about whose origin we deceived ourselves that tyrannised most strongly over us. Our weakest motives were those of whose nature we were conscious." [56]

Freud: "the core of our being, consisting of unconscious wishful impulses, remains inaccessible to the understanding.... These unconscious wishes exercise a compelling force on all later mental trends, a force which those trends are obliged to fall in with...." [*The Interpretations of Dreams*, SE, 5: 603-604]

It would no doubt be possible to locate passages of Freud which match Lord Henry's observations even more precisely than the ones I have chosen. But in any case, it should be clear enough by now that Wilde's fictional aesthete has ideas which strongly resemble such fundamental Freudian concepts as repression, the unconscious, the superego.

What are we to make of this resemblance? It is hard not to let it affect the way we read both Wilde and Freud. As far as Wilde is concerned, it becomes more difficult than ever to accept the view that Lord Henry's philosophies are mere ideological skittles which Wilde sets up only in order to knock down with the Faustian moral. For these philosophies bear, in effect, the sanction of Freud himself, and one does not have to believe in the scientific correctness of Freud's ideas in order to think highly of Wilde for anticipating them.

When we read Freud in light of the Lord Henry connection, our suspicion that his theories bore an intimate relation to his historical situation can only be strengthened. Although many of the above quotations of Freud come from late works, the concepts to which they refer are by and large present in psychoanalysis from the beginning, as either implicit or explicit elements in the model of mental activity Freud set forth in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, published in 1899.¹⁴ They were formulated, in other words, during the same decade that saw the publication of *Dorian Gray*.

Before we proceed any further in our comparison of Lord Henry and Freud, it must be acknowledged that our juxtaposition of excerpts from their respective psychologies revealed, as well as a striking number of

¹⁴But dated 1900 on the title page - see Gay, 1988: 3.

similarities, certain key differences between their discourses. The fact that Lord Henry makes no bones about the sociological nature of his theories is one of these differences. A second obvious difference is linguistic: where Freud invented new terms with which to delineate his conception of the self, Lord Henry makes do with the sometimes imprecise medium of existing language. A third difference might be called ethical: Lord Henry, shattering a key rule of scientific discourse, explicitly associates his notions of what *is* with notions of what *ought to be*.

Each of these three apparently un-Freudian qualities of Lord Henry's discourse can be seen in the following speech:

The aim of life is self-development. To realise one's nature perfectly - that is what each of us is here for. People are afraid of themselves, nowadays. They have forgotten the highest of all duties, the duty that one owes to one's self. [29]

Let us consider each of these three differences in turn, and examine how substantial they really are.

First, the linguistic difference. When Lord Henry speaks of realising one's nature, of being afraid of one's self, of one's duty to one's self, he splits the self into two components: a self-as-object capable of being developed, realised, feared, served, by the self-as-subject. The self-as-object, it emerges during the novel, is in Lord Henry's view the *authentic* self, a natural condition of being which to our cost has become forgotten. This submerged self is not dissimilar to the Freudian notion of the id, as we can see quite clearly when Lord Henry informs Dorian that "the moment I met you I saw you were quite *unconscious* of what you really are, of what you really might be" [32 - emphasis added]. The

similarity can also be seen from the opposite angle - that is, at those points in the works of Freud when he discusses his understanding of the psyche in everyday language. In the *Psychopathology*, for example, he wrote that slips of the tongue harbour "a warning that one should keep a watch on oneself" [1966: 88]. He means that one's conscious mind should keep watch on one's unconscious; but in the absence of these technical terms, he speaks of a self-as-subject and a self-as-object, precisely in the manner of Lord Henry.¹⁵ Even more suggestively, when the 'Rat Man' complains to Freud of having a divided self, and wonders whether he can effect "a re-integration of his personality", Freud tells us that

I replied that I was in complete agreement with [his] notion of a splitting of his personality. He only had to assimilate this new contrast, between a moral self and an evil one, with the contrast I had already mentioned, between the conscious and the unconscious. The moral self was the conscious, the evil self was the unconscious.¹⁶ [1991a: 58]

In this case at least, then, the difference between Freud's terminology and Lord Henry's does not reflect any deep ideological division. On the contrary, it masks a profound theoretical agreement.

Mixed up in Lord Henry's notion of the split self we find another factor which is - unsurprisingly - absent from the Freudian account. This is Lord Henry's belief that the split self is an historically peculiar phenomenon, the product of strictly contemporary moral and social

¹⁵Freud also speaks in the *Psychopathology* of the "self-revealing" nature of certain slips, of their status as a "serious self-betrayal" [ibid. 92, 89] - formulations which echo Lord Henry not only by their reference to two selves, but also by their apparent suggestion that the unconscious represents a *truer* self than the conscious does.

¹⁶Freud adds in a footnote: "All of this is of course only true in the roughest way, but it serves as a first introduction to the subject" [ibid.: 58n].

forces: namely, "the sickly aims, the false ideals of our age" [32].¹⁷ "People are afraid of themselves, nowadays," says Lord Henry - note that word *nowadays*. It is only due to an historical accident - one which can be, must be, rectified - that the self has come to consist of a suppressed essence in contention with a conformist crust. An undivided self has existed before, and can exist again, if only one pursues "the new Hedonism" whose aim is "to *recreate* life, and to save it from that harsh, uncomely puritanism that is having, in our own day, its curious revival" [104 - emphasis added].

Freud's theory of the divided self, on the other hand, has that broader kind of ambition which I have already discussed in relation to the theory of repression. For Freud, a self divided into contending parts was not merely the Victorian condition but the human one. Where Lord Henry believes that a realisation of the inner self will constitute a "return to the Hellenic ideal,"¹⁸ Freud would insist that the ancient Greeks, in spite of their relaxed sexual morals, were not exempt from the divided mental structure that was every civilized human's lot. Indeed it was the Greeks who came up with the myth of Oedipus, that supposedly classic expression of unconscious tensions.

This, then, is a genuine difference between Lord Henry and Freud. The former diagnoses, and proposes a cure for, a psychological malady peculiar to his age. The latter, although he makes a similar diagnosis at a similar time, wants us to believe that it applies to all humanity.

Lord Henry's talk of the "Hellenic ideal" represents another kind of departure from Freud's practice. The scientist's ideals are meant to be

¹⁷"To know an essence," Wilde once said to Gide, "it is necessary to suppress it" [Ellmann, 1988: 335n].

¹⁸"I believe that if one man were to live out his life fully and completely, were to give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream - I believe that the world would gain such a fresh impulse of joy that we would forget all the maladies of mediævalism, and return to the Hellenic ideal - to something finer, richer than the Hellenic ideal, it may be" [Wilde, 1988: 29].

irrelevant. Lord Henry, by so freely voicing his personal values and prejudices, opens up the possibility that it is these things, rather than sober observation, that have shaped his hypotheses. How can we believe that his psychological theories are accurate, when he shamelessly contaminates them with his personal beliefs about “the aim of life”, about “what each of us is here for”, about “the highest of all [our] duties” [29]?

When, for example, Lord Henry makes the impeccably Freudian observation that declares that “man” is not a “rational animal”, he adds something one could not imagine hearing from Freud: “I am glad he is not, after all” [36].¹⁹ By admitting that his psychological theories agree with his private ethics, Lord Henry seems to weaken the truth-claim of the former. But the interesting thing about this confession of Lord Henry’s is that it is superfluous. The reader is already meant to take it for granted that Lord Henry’s scientific pronouncements are inherently ethical, or rather inherently unethical. Throughout the novel, Lord Henry’s raw propositions are understood, both by himself and by his interlocutors, to imply a politics of radical individualism. When, for example, Lord Henry makes the observation that “Conscience and cowardice are really the same things”, Basil Hallward reacts with horror: “I don’t believe that, Harry, and I don’t believe you do either” [22].

What Hallward presumably means is that Harry is stating the notion merely in order to be provocative. But to be provocative in the trivial sense of being frivolously outrageous, this idea must also seem to Hallward to be provocative in the deeper sense of suggesting an immoral course of action, namely that of *ignoring* conscience *because* it is nothing

¹⁹On the other hand, perhaps there is a similar note of glee in Freud’s famous announcement during the *Introductory Lectures* that “Man’s craving for grandiosity is now suffering the third and most bitter blow [following those delivered by Copernicus and Darwin] from present-day psychological research which is endeavouring to prove to the ‘ego’ of each one of us that he is not even master in his own house...” [1940: 241].

more than cowardice - precisely the course of action that Dorian Gray ends up taking. It is telling that this equation of conscience with cowardice - another impeccably Freudian notion²⁰ - should have been considered, by a Victorian spectator, inherently subversive, abhorrently Mephistophelean, a self-evidently dangerous component of a wicked creed. Lord Henry's theory of the split self is similarly contaminated by aesthetic activism: the quasi-scientific observation that Dorian Gray is "unconscious of what you really *are*" unfolds at once into the unashamedly libertarian suggestion that he is also unconscious "of what you really *might be*." To identify the self as divided is to declare oneself in favour of a return to wholeness. For the partisan psychologist, description and prescription are inextricably bound together; scientific data are weapons in a social war.

In a climate in which ideas like his seemed inherently political, Freud was naturally keen to stress the value-free nature of his endeavours. In a paper of 1912,²¹ for example, he wrote:

In view of the strenuous efforts being made in the civilized world today to reform sexual life, it will not be superfluous to give a reminder that psychoanalytic research is *as remote from tendentiousness as any other kind of research. It has no other end in view than to throw light on things by tracing what is manifest back to what is hidden.* It is quite satisfied if reforms make use of its findings to replace what is injurious by something more advantageous; but it cannot predict whether other institutions may

²⁰See the quotes on pages 49 and 50 above.

²¹'On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love (Contributions to the Psychology of Love II)'.

not result in other, and perhaps graver, sacrifices. [1983b: 256 - italics added]

The very fact that Freud feels obliged to issue this disclaimer, though, suggests that psychoanalysis must be somehow closer to tendentiousness than most branches of science. It is closer by virtue of its subject-matter - one can't imagine a geologist, for example, having to stress the value-free nature of his or her researches. And it is closer historically, because it emerged at a time when "strenuous efforts [were] being made in the civilized world ... to reform sexual life" - or, to put it another way, at a time when sexual life was subject to particularly stringent restraints.

Freud was not always so irreproachably indifferent to sexual reform as he sounds in the above extract. In a letter of 1915, Freud defines himself as "a very moral human being", but adds:

I am taking the notion of morality in its social, not its sexual, sense. Sexual morality as defined by society, in its most extreme form that of America, strikes me as very contemptible. I stand for an infinitely freer sexual life, although I myself have made very little use of such freedom. [E. Freud, 1961: 314]²²

²²Freud defined morality as "the control and restriction of instinct" [1950c: 295], and it was his theoretical practice to divide instincts into two main camps - those which yearn for union with other humans, and those which are anti-social. (In 1920, with his proposal of the Death Instinct in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud began to classify instincts according to whether they followed the principle of life or of death - Eros versus Thanatos, the sexual versus the destructive. Previously, he had divided instincts into two less starkly differentiated classes: sexual instincts and ego instincts - Love and Hunger, as he would say, quoting Schiller [see Abel, 1989: 17].) It was therefore possible for Freud to speak of morality, as he does in the letter above, as a two-pronged affair. The prong which attacks our anti-social instincts Freud applauds, for suppression of these instincts is essential if society is to exist at all. "Ethics is traffic regulation," Freud once said, in reference to this basic layer of morality: "I would be miserable if automobiles ran upon the sidewalk" [quoted by Wittels, 1931: 395]. But the other prong of morality, the one devoted to suppressing our erotic instincts, Freud considers superfluous, indeed downright harmful,

Although Freud's personal sobriety ("I myself have made very little use of such freedom") has been thought by some critics to have a bearing on the debate over the nature of his ideas,²³ it is surely beside the point. Wilde's Lord Henry does not indulge himself either, but that does not render his ideas any less subversive. "You never say a moral thing, and you never do a wrong thing," the frustrated Basil Hallward complains to him [Wilde, 1988: 20]. The interesting question is not whether Freud was a Faust - he plainly wasn't - but whether he was a Mephistopheles, an ideological subversive in the tradition of Lord Henry.

The conclusion to Freud's 1908 paper on "'Civilized' Sexual Morality and Modern Nervousness" has a significant bearing on this question. It reads:

[W]e may well raise the question whether our 'civilized' sexual morality is worth the sacrifice it imposes on us, especially if we are still so much enslaved to hedonism as to include among the aims of our cultural development a certain amount of satisfaction of individual happiness. It is certainly not a physician's business to come forward with proposals for reform; but it seemed to me that I might support the urgency of such proposals if I were to amplify Von Ehrenfels's²⁴ description of the injurious effects of our 'civilized' sexual morality by pointing to the important bearing of

"very contemptible" - a verdict predicated, like Lord Henry's, on his own theory that excessive restraint of these instincts will result in mental illness.

²³For example, Philip Rieff: "Freud was no celebrant of the senses.... He hardly claimed or - from what we know of his life - himself desired to be free of the civilizing aversions" [Rieff, 1959: 154].

²⁴Von Ehrenfels, explains an editorial footnote, was a "Professor of Philosophy at Prague [who] had been praised by Freud for his courageous criticisms of the institution of marriage" [SE, 9: 204n].

that morality upon the spread of modern nervous illness. [SE, 9: 204]

How does Freud square this blatant politicking with his belief that psychoanalysis is as remote from tendentiousness as any science? He uses two tactics. The first is to draw a wholly unconvincing distinction between “com[ing] forward” with proposals for reform and “support[ing] their urgency”; if the former is “certainly not the physician’s business”, it is hard to see how the latter can be entirely above board. Freud’s other tactic is more subtle. He tells us that he is speaking as a “physician” - and if Freud the *physician* believes that sexual morality causes illness, then it would be a dereliction of duty as a healer if he did *not* recommend moral reform.

But although Freud purports to be wearing only his physician’s hat here, his psychological theorist’s hat is still firmly in place underneath. For Freud the healer’s support of reform is premised not only on the harshness of Victorian morality, but also, crucially, on an assumption about human nature derived from his own “science” - namely, the assumption that “we are still so much enslaved to hedonism as to include among the aims of our cultural development a certain amount of satisfaction of individual happiness”. This is a paraphrase of the psychological law that Freud set down in his concept of the pleasure principle. “It seems,” as he put it in the *Introductory Lectures*, “that our entire psychical activity is bent upon *procuring pleasure* and *avoiding pain*, that it is automatically regulated by the PLEASURE-PRINCIPLE” [1940, 298-299]. Once one accepts Freud’s hypothesis that our entire psychical activity is governed by the desire for pleasure - that we are “enslaved to hedonism” - then one *must* (unless one condones needless psychological suffering on a mass scale) favour a moral system which

imposes on this desire only such minimum restraints as are required in order that individuals can live together. Plainly Victorian morality did not answer this description. It indulged in a large amount of suppression for suppression's sake. And so Freudian theory, in the moral climate in which it evolved, was indeed a form of subversive ethics.

Again the case of Lord Henry underlines this point. Lord Henry's libertarianism is rooted in the pleasure-principle-like assumption that a desire for pleasure is a natural inevitability. "Pleasure is the only thing worth having a theory about," he says. "But I am afraid I cannot claim my theory as my own. It belongs to Nature, not to me. Pleasure is Nature's test, her sign of approval" [Wilde, 1988: 69].²⁵ By thinking of the drive for pleasure as incorrigible, Lord Henry renders morality futile - if morals cannot extinguish desire, they can only force it inward, damaging mental health. "Every impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the mind, and poisons us" [29]. Ergo, impulses *must* be yielded to, rather than stifled - not Lord Henry's whimsical opinion, but a medical fact.

If the theory of pleasure really does belong to nature, then Lord Henry has hit on an impregnable argument for hedonism, a scientific *is* which is simultaneously a hedonistic *ought*. Freud's theory of the pleasure principle likewise offers us a picture of the way things are which is also a blueprint for the way things ought to be. Freud was an atheist, but his pleasure principle imbued godless life with a teleology, for it is nothing less than an answer to the question of

what the behaviour of men themselves reveals as the purpose and object of their lives, what they demand of life and wish to attain

²⁵Wilde framed a similar principle under his own name in 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism' (1895): "It is mentally and morally injurious to man to do anything in which he does not find pleasure" [1970c: 244]. Victorian moral law, as Wilde would shortly discover, saw to it that certain things in which one did find pleasure could prove equally injurious.

in it. The answer to this can hardly be in doubt. They want to become happy and to remain so.... As we see, it is simply the pleasure principle which draws up the program of life's purpose. [1949a: 27-28]

The fact that the pleasure principle is not allowed to *administer* this program in the real world - a task which falls to the reality principle - does not alter the fundamentally hedonistic character of life as Freud saw it. For the reality principle is a mere delegate of the pleasure principle, a modified version of it, and its aim remains the same: "the REALITY-PRINCIPLE ... at bottom also seeks pleasure - although a delayed and diminished pleasure, one which is assured by its realization of fact, its relation to reality" [Freud, 1940: 299]. In the unreal world of the unconscious, moreover, the reality principle does not get a look in: the pleasure principle "exerts undisputed sway" [Freud, 1933: 106] over unconscious processes, and constantly secures pleasure on our behalf by shaping our dreams, manipulating our slips of the tongue, engineering our "clumsy" movements, and so on. To Freud, we are all thorough and diligent Epicureans whether we know it or not. Hence the relish we take in the 'Epicurean' jokes Freud mentions in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*: The message of such jokes, Freud explains, is

'Yes.... There is nothing higher than enjoyment and it is more or less a matter of indifference how one obtains it.' This sounds shockingly immoral and is no doubt not much better. But at bottom it is nothing other than the poet's '*Carpe diem*', which appeals to the uncertainty of life and the unfruitfulness of virtuous renunciation In reality each of us has had hours and times at which he has admitted the rightness of this philosophy of

life and has reproached moral doctrine with only understanding how to demand without offering any compensation. Since we have ceased any longer to believe in the promise of a next world in which every renunciation will be rewarded by a satisfaction ... 'Carpe diem' has become a serious warning. I will gladly put off satisfaction: but do I know whether I shall still be here tomorrow? ... What these jokes whisper may be said aloud: that the wishes and desires of men have a right to make themselves acceptable alongside of exacting and ruthless morality. And in our days it has been said in forceful and stirring sentences that this morality is only a selfish regulation laid down by the few who are rich and powerful and who can satisfy their wishes at any time without postponement. So long as the art of healing has not gone further in making our life safe and so long as social arrangements do no more to make it more enjoyable, so long will it be impossible to stifle the voice in us that rebels against the demands of morality. [Freud, 1960: 109-110]

Passages like this one confirm that Freud installed in us all, like a piece of psychological hardware, a Wilde-like attitude to pleasure. Yet partisans of Freud have maintained, apparently against the grain of some of Freud's own writings, that psychoanalysis has nothing whatever to do with hedonism. Often such critics are content to trundle out the well-worn observation that Freud was a "sober bourgeois" - as great a red herring, as we have seen, as the personal sobriety of Wilde's Lord Henry. But sometimes the defence is mounted on a more sophisticated level. In his *Freud: The Mind of the Moralizer*, Philip Rieff argues that "the reputation of Freud as a libertine reformer" is unmerited [Rieff, 1959: 163]. Rieff is familiar, needless to say, with the theory of the pleasure

principle, and therefore knows that "pleasure is, for Freud, identical with motivation in general; there can be no other motive" [325]. Nonetheless, Rieff maintains that Freudian theory was not remotely hedonistic, for in it "[p]leasure is defined, after the manner of Schopenhauer, as a negative phenomenon, the struggle to release oneself from unpleasure, or tension.... To understand pleasure as its own abrogation is scarcely a form of hedonism; such a conception serves better as a critique of it" [155].

By Rieff's standards, though, if Freud is not a hedonist then neither was Epicurus himself, who stressed in his letter to Menoeceus that "when we say, that pleasure is the end and aim, we do not mean the pleasure of the prodigal or the pleasure of sensuality, as we are understood to do by some through ignorance, prejudice or wilful misrepresentation.... By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul..." [quoted by Vaughan, 1982: 34].

If the hedonism of Wilde's Lord Henry is probed, a similarly negative definition of pleasure can be found at its core. Lord Henry's belief that "the only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it" is outrageously hedonistic, but it also implies a subtle redefinition of what pleasure is. Pleasure is not a matter of obtaining something from outside the self, a matter of superfluity; it is a *getting rid* of an internal urge - an urge which will fester ("resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing") if it is not attended to. Getting pleasure is therefore synonymous with getting rid of unpleasure. Neither Wilde nor Lord Henry seems to think that the modesty of this conception of pleasure makes their project somehow less than hedonistic. On the contrary, this negative idea of pleasure is the very engine of their hedonism. By defining pleasure as the release of internal tensions which are in constant supply, they are able to make the quest for pleasure both fundamental and never-ending. The pleasure-quest of the decadent hero, from Dorian Gray to

Huysmans's *Des Esseintes*, tends to be a story not of satisfaction but of ongoing hunger. Dorian, for example, finds that

That curiosity about life which Lord Henry had first stirred in him ... seemed to increase with gratification. The more he knew, the more he desired to know. He had mad hungers that grew more ravenous as he fed them. [1988: 103]

And when the decadent's attempt to find nourishment in the outer world suffers the inevitable, the quest tends to turn inward. Think of *Des Esseintes*'s retirement into his haven of solitude, and of its deep consistency with Freud's dictum that "Painful feelings are connected with an increase and pleasurable feelings with a decrease in stimulation" [1950a: 64].²⁶

"A new Hedonism," says Lord Henry - "that is what our century wants" [32]. This new hedonism is based on a negative understanding of the nature of pleasure, and in that respect does not differ from the old hedonism of Epicurus. Lord Henry makes the project new by bringing it into a century in which the self's animal needs had been re-emphasised

²⁶It was, said Freud, "the most important" of his basic postulates that "the nervous system is an apparatus having the function of abolishing stimuli which reach it, or of reducing excitation to the lowest possible level: an apparatus would even, if this were feasible, maintain itself in an altogether unstimulated condition" [Freud, 1950a: 63]. Compare this with the insular Paterian ethic which Wilde records in his *College Notebooks*: "The end of life is not action but contemplation, not doing but being..." [Smith and Hefland, 1989: 141]. Such an ethic informed the activities, or inactivities, of many a *fin-de-siècle* aesthete and decadent. In 'The Critic as Artist', Wilde defends the contemplation of art by linking it explicitly with a definition of pleasure every bit as negative as Freud's. "It is through Art, and through Art only, that we can realise our perfection; through Art, and through Art only, that we can shield ourselves from the sordid perils of actual existence. This results not merely from the fact that nothing one can imagine is worth doing, and one can imagine everything, but from the subtle law that emotional forces, like the forces of the physical sphere, are limited in extent and energy. One can feel so much, and no more" [Wilde, 1970a: 151-152 - emphasis added]. Cf. Freud's "What is called happiness in its narrowest sense comes from the satisfaction of pent-up needs which have reached great intensity, and by its very nature can only be a transitory experience.... Our possibilities of happiness are thus limited from the start by our very constitution" [1949a: 27-28].

by Darwin, while public morality strove all the more vigorously to deny them. In these two respects the quest for pleasure acquired a greater urgency in the second half of the nineteenth century, shaping the theories of Wilde and his Lord Henry, of Huysmans and his Des Esseintes, of Pater and his Marius - and, arguably, of Freud himself.

"Another name for cowardice": Conscience in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

If Lord Henry's theories contain a concept radically akin to the pleasure principle, must it not also be said that the dire upshot of Dorian Gray's implementation of those theories points to the indispensability of the reality principle? In other words, if the novel does tell us something about Freud, doesn't it remind us of the ultimately *conservative* nature of his message - that for all his talk of 'Carpe Diem', he sternly counselled that the quest for pleasure must be subordinated to a sober respect for reality?

A thumb-nail summary of the novel's plot would suggest that the answer to that question is yes. Dorian Gray, intoxicated by Lord Henry's discourse, utters the fateful wish: "If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! ... I would give my soul for that!" [34]. The wish is fulfilled: it is indeed the picture which will grow old and ugly, while the fleshly Dorian retains his youthful beauty. Much more importantly, the portrait turns out to register Dorian's moral withering as well as his physical ageing. It becomes his conscience. He locks it away in an attic, thereby freeing himself to pursue such activities as drug abuse and murder while continuing to appear pure. (The

assumption that moral impurity is something that will show up physically, unless you happen to own a magic picture, is something I will return to later).

As the novel progresses, the portrait which Dorian initially thinks of as a tool of liberation becomes increasingly something he must liberate himself from - an overwhelmingly oppressive presence. Pushing his luck, Dorian attempts to destroy the portrait with a knife. The attempt fails, the spell is broken, and the novel ends with a seemingly unequivocal tableau: a corpse lies on the floor, "withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage". Hanging above it is the original portrait, depicting the late Dorian Gray "in all the wonder of his exquisite youth and beauty" [167]. This denouement was described by Wilde, in a letter, thus: "Dorian Gray, having led a life of mere sensation and pleasure, tries to kill conscience, and at that moment kills himself" [Hart-Davis, 1962: 259].

But as I have already said, we have good reason not to take Wilde at his word here. It is hard to believe that Wilde, of all people, would perpetrate so facile an endorsement of conscience. For what *was* conscience, if not the internalised repository of all those Victorian moral values which Wilde had so vigorously devoted himself to mocking? If *Dorian Gray* is Wilde's way of giving the Victorian moral conscience two thumbs up, then how do we explain the scathing critique of conscience Wilde assayed in, say, 'The Critic as Artist', published in the same year as the novel?

The mere existence of conscience, that faculty of which people prate, is a sign of our imperfect development. It must be merged in instinct before we become fine. Self-denial is simply a method by which man arrests his progress, and self-sacrifice a survival of mutilation of the savage, part of that old worship of pain which is

so terrible a factor in the history of the world, and which even now makes its victims day by day.... [1970a: 126]

The fate of Dorian Gray is in fact, I want to suggest, in perfect harmony with these sentiments. By reading Dorian's problematic quest carefully, we will find that it confirms, rather than contradicts, Lord Henry's philosophies, and effects the thoroughgoing *critique* of conscience that one would expect of Wilde. This means not only that the novel as a whole can be reintegrated into the main line of Wilde's thought, but also that in the texture of its action, as well as in the speeches of its resident psychologist, it has something to tell us about the radical implications of Freudian theory.

In order to conduct such a reading of the novel, we have to pay heed to one of the book's chief themes: that appearance does not always correspond to reality. Let us apply this principle to the device of the portrait. The portrait renders evil visible. By having Dorian's misdeeds show up as quasi-objective distortions on the surface of the picture, Wilde would *appear* to be endorsing, indeed reifying, an idea which he had himself helped to make rather unfashionable - namely, the idea that good and evil are permanent, objectively-determined qualities. Wilde would *appear*, in other words, to agree with the portrait's creator, Basil Hallward, who says: "Sin is a thing that writes itself across a man's face. It cannot be concealed" [117].

Could Oscar Wilde really have embraced the notion that sin is defined and punished by nature? Some critics believe so. Donald L. Lawler, for example, asserts that

[t]hat which finally destroys Dorian is his own egotism and wilfulness.... He imagines himself as free from the *moral law of*

nature as he was from the physical law of ageing. The oddly prophetic quality about this story for Wilde's own life is difficult to ignore. [Lawler, 1988: 30 - emphasis added.]

It seems to me that Lawler's allusion to Wilde's private life offers definitive proof of the wrong-headedness of his argument. Surely Wilde's personal demise is one of history's more notorious demonstrations of the *unnaturalness* of moral law. It was the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, and not mother nature, which defined Wilde's activities as sins, and which put him away for two years. More to the point, it seems highly implausible that Wilde himself would have been prepared to view the covert activities he was engaging in, and getting away with, as violations of eternal natural laws.²⁷ An avid Hellenist, Wilde was fully aware that his "sins" were not by definition sinful. On this matter, it seems highly unlikely that Wilde would have disagreed with Lord Henry's suggestion that "modern morality consists in accepting the standard of one's age" [69].²⁸

Where, then, does the notion that "sin is a thing that writes itself across a man's face" come from? The answer seems embarrassingly obvious. *Dorian Gray* is a fantastic narrative; Wilde has chosen to make his points about human nature and the society of his time against a backdrop of certain supernatural assumptions in which we are not literally supposed to believe. The most glaring such assumption is that a person can change places with a picture - a notion which, as far as I know, no critic has ever accused Wilde of seriously crediting. The idea that sin writes itself across one's face seems to me to have essentially the same

²⁷According to Richard Ellmann, Wilde's homosexual activities began in 1886, i.e. four years before he began work on *Dorian Gray*. "After 1886 he was able to think of himself as a criminal, moving guiltily among the innocent" [1988: 261].

²⁸A perception Wilde also lent to Gilbert in 'The Critic as Artist'. "It takes a thoroughly selfish age, like our own, to deify self-sacrifice" [1970a: 160].

status: it is a narrative cog without which the plot could not function. The very fact that Wilde has one of his characters spell the idea out is probably a hint that he did not personally accept it, that it seemed to him an assumption which had to be voiced because it did not apply outside the novel - in contrast to those assumptions which are not voiced because Wilde is confident that the reader will bring them to the novel, such as the assumption that waking up after noon is decadent, that knives are sharp, that murder is bad, that opium results in intoxication, and so on.

If the device of the portrait *does* rise above its status as narrative cog to offer a philosophical comment on the notion that sin is a visible commodity, it seems to me that the comment is harshly critical. The portrait allows Wilde to subject contemporary assumptions about good and evil to some rigorous scrutiny, and ultimately to condemn them. We can see this by examining exactly what the picture does in its capacity as Dorian's conscience.

Dorian first learns of the picture's powers when, after his unchivalrous termination of his romance with an innocent young actress, Sibyl Vane, a sneer of cruelty appears on the lips of his virtual self. "For every sin that he committed," Dorian realises with horror, "a stain would fleck and wreck its fairness" [78]. On the basis of this information, Dorian makes a laudable ethical decision. He decides that the picture will offer him a unique opportunity: the opportunity to be *more* moral than usual. If this picture will register his every sin, then his response will be simple, and pure:

he would not sin. The picture, changed or unchanged, would be to him the visible emblem of conscience. He would resist temptation ... the portrait that Basil Hallward had painted of him

would be a guide to him through life, would be to him what holiness is to some, and conscience to others, and the fear of God to us all. [78-79]

Dorian's first application of this attitude takes the form of a resolution "to go back to Sibyl Vane, make her amends, marry her, try to love her again" [79].

On first learning that the picture is his conscience, then, Dorian evinces the pious respect for that faculty which the novel as a whole is generally accused of upholding. But Dorian's initial reverence for conscience seems unsound in several respects. For one thing, it is conceived in the grip of fear: even after he makes his good resolution, he is still shuddering; he hides the portrait behind a large screen, and murmurs "How horrible!" [79].

Moreover, Wilde explicitly places Dorian's reverence for conscience on a footing with holiness and the fear of God - forms of faith which were becoming increasingly problematical in Wilde's age. "The faith that others give to what is unseen," Wilde would declare in 'De Profundis', "I give to what one can touch, and look at" [Hart-Davis, 1986: 196]. So already, even though Dorian Gray has resolved to obey his conscience, the novel has quietly started to question the authority of conscience by suggesting that it is based on fear and unreason.

Dorian's reverence for conscience only holds good for about ten pages. Before the conclusion of the next chapter, we find him studying the picture once more. "He felt that the time had really come for making his choice" [87]. But hasn't he already made his choice, back on page seventy-nine? Evidently the answer is no - meaning that we were right to think of Dorian's initial piety as unsound, a mere knee-jerk response. When it comes to making a choice for the long term, Dorian decides that

the true significance of the portrait is the freedom it grants him to flout the demands of conscience:

Or had his choice already been made? Yes, life had decided that for him - life, and his own infinite curiosity about life. Eternal youth, infinite passion, pleasures subtle and secret, wild joys and wilder sins - he was to have all these things. The portrait was to bear the burden of his shame: that was all. [87-88]

The way Dorian sees it, he can continue to observe the picture's message, but will be free simply to ignore it. "[T]here would be," he thinks, "a real pleasure in watching it" [88]. On this point he will soon be proved drastically wrong.

Let us step back for a moment into Dorian's ten-page period of obeisance to the portrait. This initial policy is based, he claims, on an important realisation about the nature of conscience, one far more high-minded than Lord Henry's notion that conscience is a mere synonym for cowardice. "I am perfectly happy now," Dorian tells Lord Henry:

I know what conscience is , to begin with. It is not what you told me it was. It is the divinest thing in us . Don't sneer at it Harry, any more - at least not before me. I want to be good. I can't bear the idea of my soul being hideous. [82 - emphasis added]

Dorian's subsequent decision to ignore the picture seems to imply that he has encountered, in the meantime, alternative information about what conscience is - something which has extinguished his opinion that it is "the divinest thing in us" and inclined him instead towards the sneering anti-conscience attitude of Lord Henry. And indeed he has.

Sibyl Vane, the jilted actress with whom Dorian had decided to make amends, has suicided. Immediately after hearing this awful news, Dorian

rushed to the screen, and drew it back. No; there was no further change in the picture. It had received the news of Sibyl Vane's death before he had known of it himself. It was conscious of the events of life as they occurred. The vicious cruelty that marred the fine lines of the mouth had, no doubt, appeared at the very moment that the girl had drunk the poison, whatever it was. Or was it indifferent to results? Did it merely take cognizance of what passed within the soul? [87]

The answer to those final two questions (which in any case seem to have been thrown in as an afterthought) is a firm *no*. If the portrait confined itself to monitoring what passed in the soul, then Dorian's good resolution to marry Sibyl Vane would have erased, or at least mitigated, the sneer of evil that formed when he spurned her. But the sneer remains intact - meaning that Dorian is right to fear that the portrait is more interested in bad results than in good intentions. The portrait illustrates, quite literally, a principle that Lord Henry has helpfully just uttered: that "Good resolutions are useless attempts to interfere with scientific laws.... Their result is absolutely nil" [84].

So Dorian's plan to use the portrait as a tool to assist moral conduct is foiled by the distressing discovery that he is not the sole, or even the primary, author of the image on the canvas. The picture refuses to register his intentions, yet changes in accordance to events totally beyond his control. There is therefore truth in Dorian's feeling that his decision has been made for him. His confident belief that "conscience is ... the divinest thing in us" has been rudely shaken on two counts. First,

conscience is not divine: it is unfair and unreasonable, even malicious. Moreover, it is not even *in us*; to a frightening extent it is *beyond* us, out of our control.

Dorian's decision to ignore his conscience is one he is pushed to, then, by the nature of his conscience itself. This is our first encounter with a revolutionary suggestion about conscience: that it can function as a *cause* of immoral conduct. This suggestion, which later events in the novel will amplify, gravely undermines the traditional understanding of the novel. Wilde is not saying that we are evil unless we have conscience. He is saying that we are evil *because* of it.

But the novel's critique of conscience begins much earlier, at the very moment when Dorian Gray successfully banishes his conscience to the surface of a painting. It seems to me that this supernatural manoeuvre, far from reifying conscience, makes the highly subversive suggestion that your conscience, unlike your desires, is a mere *appendix of the self* - it can be removed without affecting the integrity of the individual. "One only realises one's soul," Wilde would write in 'De Profundis', "by getting rid of all alien passions, all acquired culture, and all external possessions be they good or evil" [Hart-Davis, 1987: 207]. Wilde's novel seems to put this proposition to the test, identifying conscience as a major one of these external possessions, these cumbersome pieces of cultural luggage which must be thrown overboard before the individualist can effectively pursue his or her goal. "What a man really has, is what is in him," Wilde wrote in 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism'. "What is outside of him should be a matter of no importance" [1970c: 235]. Lord Henry says something similar: "To be good is to be in harmony with one's self. Discord is to be forced to be in harmony with others" [1988: 69]. Conscience is implicitly identified as the prime agency hampering one's harmony with oneself, and enforcing

one's harmony with others. Conscience can be effectively transferred to the external world, because *that is where it belongs in the first place*.

A similarly subversive flavour can be detected in Wilde's decision to place sin and its supposed consequences on the *surface* of a portrait. Can't this be construed as an exposé of the superficiality of the concept of sin? Mightn't Wilde be insinuating that sin is something imposed from without, like paint, with society wielding the brush? The novel persistently speaks of the "spotting" and "staining" and "flecking" suffered by the evil-doer - terms suggestive of superficial rather than organic corruption. Perhaps Wilde wants to tell us that evil, in common with beauty, is only skin-deep, and exists only in the eye of the beholder. Those who adjudge Dorian Gray virtuous because of his pure appearance have only themselves to blame, because they measure virtue by the most shallow of criteria:

Even those who had heard the most evil things against him ...
could not believe anything to his dishonour when they saw him.
He had always the look of someone who had kept himself
unspotted from the world. Men who talked grossly became silent
when Dorian Gray entered the room. There was something in the
purity of his face that rebuked them. His mere presence seemed
to recall to them the memory of the innocence that they had
tarnished. They wondered how one so charming and graceful as
he was could have escaped the stain of an age that was at once
sordid and sensual. [102]

Here Dorian looks good when he is really evil. Previously, the portrait has made him look evil when he was trying to be good. Wilde is surely alerting us to the superficiality of the moral standards of his age of

stain. If purity is only a matter of how effectively one remains “unspotted from the world”, then Dorian’s victory may not be so shallow after all; or, to put it another way, in the Victorian moral world, a shallow victory was perhaps all that was needed. In retaining the appearance of purity, Dorian perhaps retains all that purity really is. He thinks of the picture as “the visible emblem of conscience”; but perhaps conscience itself is nothing more than an emblem anyway, a record not of what you really *are* but only of how the world *sees* you. In that respect there is nothing particularly far-fetched or fantastic about transferring sin to a portrait - nothing, at any rate, more far-fetched or fantastic than certain conceptions of sin are to begin with.

Dorian’s (re)externalisation of conscience does not, of course, have the desired effect. The picture turns Dorian’s pleasure-quest into a nightmare, and ultimately kills him. Why, if Wilde is lambasting conscience, does this happen? The answer, as we shall see, is that Wilde introduces into his critique of conscience several complications, so that as the novel progresses we find that conscience, as well as being a foreign body which ought to be expelled from the self, possesses further malicious characteristics which make that expulsion extremely difficult, perhaps even impossible.

But before we consider what those characteristics are, let us review the basic model of conscience which we have already extracted from the text. Conscience, the picture tells us, is nothing more than society’s picture of you, composed according to arbitrary and oppressive norms, and connected to the essential self only in the sense that you are obliged to carry it about in your head. In ‘De Profundis’, Wilde wrote: “‘Nothing is more rare in any man,’ says Emerson, ‘than an act of his own.’ It is

quite true. Most people are other people" [1986: 208].²⁹ Wilde's novel suggests that conscience, and the actions we perform to please it, constitute the supreme manifestation of this pernicious principle. It shows us a young man who wants to live a life composed exclusively of acts of his own, and who takes an apparently large stride towards this goal by sending his conscience back where it came from, and where it therefore belongs - outside the self, back in the realm of other people. Rather than let society paint and taint him, he will cultivate his *own* picture of his self.³⁰

It is not difficult to see how Wilde might have arrived at such a view of conscience. The Victorian moral conscience was so grotesquely demanding that its more intelligent victims could hardly fail to think of it as both foreign and artificial. Wilde, in particular, must have found risible, if not downright contemptible, society's demand that he feel guilty about activities that he knew full well to be victimless. He could hardly accept as a natural part of the self an agency devoted to upholding, and enforcing, what he has Lord Henry call "the sickly aims, the false ideals of our age" [32].

The Freudian model of conscience has many striking similarities to Wilde's. For the early Freud, conscience was associated with a concept he called the ego-ideal. When he developed the so-called second topography, the ego-ideal was superseded by the concept of the superego, which took its place beside the ego and the id as the third chief agency of

²⁹Cf. a comment he made in a letter of 1892: "[A]nybody can act. Most people in England do nothing else. To be conventional is to be a comedian" [quoted by Ellmann, 1988: 349]. Lord Henry makes a similar point: "Being natural is simply a pose, and the most irritating pose I know" [20].

³⁰"One should either be a work of art, or wear a work of art," Wilde wrote in his 'Phrases and Philosophies for the use of the Young' [1988: 1206].

mental activity.³¹ Reading Freud's account of the superego in the *New Introductory Lectures*, it is hard to miss certain echoes of the theory of conscience that we have extrapolated from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. "Even if conscience is something 'within us'," Freud says,

yet it is not so from the first.... The part which is later taken by the super-ego is played to begin with by an external power, by parental authority.... So long as it is dominant there is no need to talk of a super-ego and of a conscience. It is only subsequently that the secondary situation develops (which we are all too ready to regard as the normal one), where the external restraint is internalised and the super-ego takes the place of the parental agency and observes, directs and threatens the ego in exactly the same way as earlier the parents did with the child. [SE, 22: 61]

In naming the parents as the source of our internalised values, Freud is being much more specific than Wilde about the sector of society where our conscience originates. But on the essential point that our conscience is not an original part of us - that it is, as Freud says elsewhere, "imposed from without" [1950h: 57] - Wilde and Freud are in complete accord. And it is in this very respect that much of the radical novelty of Freud's view of conscience lies, as Richard Rorty explains:

Whereas everybody from Plato to Kant had identified our central self, our conscience, the standard-setting, authoritative part of us, with universal truths ... Freud made conscience just one more, not particularly central, part of a larger, homogenous machine. He

³¹On the vexed question of the difference between the ego-ideal and the superego, see note 32 below.

identified the sense of duty with the internalization of a host of idiosyncratic, accidental episodes. [Rorty, 1991: 157]

Freud's decentralisation of conscience did not, of course, amount to a suggestion that conscience could or should be ignored. On the contrary, by linking it with unconscious mental processes, Freud probably made conscience less escapable than ever. The superego's "independence of the conscious ego and the closeness of its relations with the unconscious id", he tells us, gives rise to the "paradoxical proposition that normal man is not only much more immoral than he believes, *but also far more moral than he knows*" [1947: 76 - emphasis added]. Conscience, in other words, issues its demands, its threats, its rewards and its punishments from a venue inaccessible to the conscious mind.

Wilde, while he saw that conscience was beyond the control of the conscious self, did not go so far as to posit the existence of an unconscious mind whose control it *was* under. But he did accuse the processes of conscience of possessing a deep irrationality. Indeed, as we are about to see, Wilde's identification of this irrationality is the sting in the tail of the critique of conscience he advances in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Let us resume our analysis of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* at the point where Dorian, having successfully banished his conscience to the surface of the picture, and having decided to live a life free of its demands, locks the thing away in a room to which he alone possesses the key. At this point Dorian would seem to have clinched a comprehensive victory over conscience: not only has he excised it, giving it an appropriately shallow new home on the surface of a canvas; he has, crucially, ensured that nobody apart from himself will be able to see it. He has secured the conditions of which Lord Henry dreams, where the demands of others

need have no hold on him whatsoever. "He felt safe now," Wilde tells us. "No one would ever look at the horrible thing. No eye but his would ever see his shame" [99-100].

A mere eleven pages later, though, we are told that the picture retains its capacity to induce in Dorian "a fear that seemed to him too great to be borne" [111]. Why this fear? There is no reason for it: objectively, Dorian is home free. We can only deduce that the fear is unreasonable, subjective. This proves painfully true. The fact that no eye but Dorian's can see the picture - ostensibly a reason to feel safe - will turn out to be the very root of his torment, and the cause of his death.

Dorian's irrational fear of the picture is most dramatically manifested in his persistent feeling that the picture is watching him. "[H]e saw the face of his portrait leering in the sunlight" [133]; "in the eyes there was a look of cunning" [166]. The gaze is "horrible in its cruelty", manifesting "censure" and "rebuke". "His own soul was looking out at him from the canvas and calling him to judgement" [97].

Such a feeling of being watched was, according to Freud, only a slight magnification of a normal function of conscience.³² But in Wilde's

³²From 'On Narcissism': "It would not surprise us if we were to find a special institution in the mind which performs the task of seeing that narcissistic gratification is secured from the ego-ideal and that, with this end in view, it constantly watches the real ego and measures it by that ideal. If such an institution does exist, it cannot possibly be something which we have not yet discovered; we only need to recognize it, and we may say that what we call our *conscience* has the required characteristics. Recognition of this institution enables us to understand the so-called 'delusions of observation' or, more correctly, of *being watched*, which are such striking symptoms in the paranoid diseases and may perhaps also occur as an isolated illness.... Patients of this sort complain that all their thoughts are known and their actions watched and overlooked.... This complaint is justified - it describes the truth; a power of this kind, watching, discovering and criticizing all our intentions, does really exist; indeed, it exists with every one of us in normal life. The delusion of being watched presents it in a regressive form, thereby revealing the genesis of this function and the reason why the patient is in revolt against it" [1950h: 52 -53].

It will be seen that this passage defines conscience and the ego-ideal as separate agencies. In a footnote to this passage, Freud's editor James Strachey remarks: "In some of Freud's later writings this distinction between the ideal and the agency enforcing it became blurred" [SE, 22: 65n]. Strachey is right: it is a difficult business establishing precisely how the superego differs from the ego-ideal, or how either of them differs from what we traditionally call conscience, or whether indeed any of them differ much at all.

novel, Dorian's feeling of being watched is involved in the crowning part of Wilde's critique of the peculiar monstrosity of the Victorian conscience. That Dorian's conscience is not an essential part of him looks, initially, like exciting news. But the otherness of Dorian's conscience cuts both ways: it allows him to smoothly banish it to a place beyond him, but it also means that conscience will continue to live, even outside him, this life of its own. At first this independent life shows up subtly, in distortions of the image which occur in defiance of Dorian's intentions. But soon enough the picture demonstrates the chilling extent of its autonomy by looking back at Dorian with its own eyes.

If the eyes of the portrait are not Dorian's, whose are they? In effect, they belong to society; just as the body depicted by the portrait is society's ugly image of him, so its eyes represent society's disapproving gaze. Wilde sees, as Freud did, that conscience has a dual function; it operates both as an ideal to which one looks for guidance, and, if one fails to rise to that ideal, an agency of punishment.

But there is one more complication still. Dorian does not need, rationally speaking, to fear the picture's gaze, any more than he needs to fear its ugly depiction of his body. If anything, the picture's gaze should come as a pleasant reminder of his victory. For society's gaze is only a real danger to those who *don't* own magic pictures, and whose corruption occurs in public. Dorian's shame is safely locked away, and so the picture's eyes represent an empty threat, a harmless parody of real social disapproval. Why then does Dorian fear them? Again the fear is obviously irrational, and deepens Wilde's objection to the thuggish nature of the "divinest thing in us", and to the superstitious nature of our fear of it.

Nor can one resolve this confusion by looking up 'Superego' in the Index to the *Standard Edition*. Directly beneath the subcategory "distinguished from conscience," which has three entries, one finds the subcategory "equated with conscience," which has seven.

But we can say more about Dorian's fear of the portrait's gaze than that it is irrational. It is an irrational fear which functions in the service of conscience. So there is at least one component of conscience - which one might call the fear of conscience - which has not been externalised to the portrait, but which has remained all along *inside* Dorian Gray. To put it another way, Dorian Gray's own eyes, the eyes with which he perceives the picture's reciprocal gaze, are not fully his own. They too still belong, to a telling degree, to society, and therefore he continues to feel the fear, and the guilt, that conscience wants him to feel. The supernatural transaction with the portrait has not wholly freed Dorian of conscience, then. Conscience has sunk its roots too deep into the essential self to allow such an easy amputation. It is a malignant tumour rather than a benign one.

This point can be borne out if we imagine an alternative version of the story. Imagine that Dorian's butler, immediately after Dorian utters his fateful wish, short-sightedly mistakes the portrait for a piece of garbage, and removes it from the house. Dorian Gray, assuming that it has been stolen, gradually forgets about the picture and his impetuous wish to change places with it, and gets on with his life. He retains his youth forever, although nobody, including himself, knows why. The picture, meanwhile, carries out its magical mission in a dump somewhere, unobserved by anyone. This would not be much of a plot, but it would be far more accurately the story of a man who is *free of the demands of conscience* than the book we have. If this hypothetical Dorian Gray committed any sins, they would cause a warping of his image which occurred beyond the range of any human gaze - including his own. It is this last point which is, for the non-hypothetical Dorian Gray, the rub: he *does* see the warping of his own image, and it is this *awareness* of the portrait's power which is his undoing.

Although the device of the picture allows Dorian to externalise certain parts of his conscience, it still haunts him and taunts him, it still costs him sleep, it still condemns his misdeeds - in short, *it continues to function as his conscience*. The portrait does not effect a suspension of the workings of conscience, it merely brings those workings out into the light of day, where Wilde can analyse and ultimately condemn them. We should not have to construct a hypothetical version of the story in order to show that Dorian's conscience never stops working, for Wilde's novel gives it to us in black and white:

It had kept him awake at night. When he had been away, he had been filled with terror lest other eyes should look upon it. It had brought melancholy across his passions. Its mere memory had marred many moments of joy. It had been like conscience to him. Yes, it had been conscience. [166]

The traditional reading of the book paraphrases the story more or less as follows: "Look at all the dreadful things we get up to if we disobey our conscience. *Ergo*, conscience must be a good thing, and we must not attempt to live without it." This reading hinges on the assumption that Dorian Gray, at an early point in the novel, successfully frees himself from conscience. But this assumption is invalid. The above passage, which occurs on the novel's second-last page, tells us quite clearly that Dorian's conscience, despite its partial relocation to the picture, has never ceased for a moment to function in the normal way - if normal is the right word for a function so grotesque. The Faustian liberation has never really occurred.

As well as underlining the point that Dorian's conscience is never absent, the passage quoted above offers the novel's last explicit comment

on what conscience is. The picture, we are told, has "been conscience to him". In what sense? Certainly it has not been what Dorian originally thought conscience to be, a benign agency which helps one to be good. Nor has it agreed with his second notion of what conscience is: an unjust bully which one can happily ignore once one has recognised its artificiality. No: the picture has "been conscience to him" in the sense that it has tortured him remorselessly, irrationally, and irrespective of any particular evil deed.

Conscience is a fraud, the novel starts off by saying; it has nothing to do with the genuine self; the codes it enforces are mere conventions, prejudices; the methods by which it enforces them are, perhaps as a consequence of this, thoroughly irrational: but even so, comes the pessimistic conclusion, one *can't get rid of it*. The novel tells us about the Victorian conscience the same distressing thing that Wilde's private life showed about Victorian morality: perceiving its fictional foundation does not grant you freedom from its jurisdiction. It was a paper tiger with real teeth. Only a reprehensible bigot would interpret Oscar Wilde's tragic demise as a triumphant demonstration of the rightness of Victorian morality; we should be careful, then, before we read Dorian's demise as a hymn to conscience. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a complaint against the grotesque distortions of the Victorian conscience, and a lament about the tenacity with which it has sunk its claws into the authentic self.

It would be intolerable, one would think, if the essential self were permanently at the mercy of this malignant agency. Happily, Wilde does not consider Dorian's condition inevitable. He presents it as an ailment peculiar to Dorian's time: a function of what Lord Henry calls "that harsh, uncomely puritanism that is having, in our own day, its curious

revival" [104]. For Freud, on the other hand, we must all be Dorian Grays, condemned to be forever at war with ourselves.

From the point of view of morality, the control and restriction of instinct, it may be said of the id that it is totally non-moral, of the ego that it strives to be moral, and of the superego that it can be hypermoral and then becomes as ruthless as the id can be. It is remarkable that the more a man checks his aggressive tendencies towards others the more tyrannical, that is aggressive, he becomes in his ego-ideal.... It is like a displacement, *a turning round upon the self*. But even ordinary normal morality has a harshly restraining, cruelly prohibiting quality. It is from this, indeed, that the conception arises of an inexorable higher being who metes out punishment. [1947: 79 - emphasis added]

By thus taking the Victorian moral situation as his norm, Freud made hypocrisy and self-hatred permanent features of the human condition. As Jung comments in his analysis of 'Sigmund Freud in his Historical Setting':

[E]thical motives as final and indisputable factors in human life, disappear in the Freudian teaching. They are replaced by a conventional morality about which it is rightly assumed that it would never have existed in this form, or never have existed at all, if one or more bad-tempered ancestors had not invented such precepts as a protection against the evil consequences of their impotence. These concepts, it is further assumed, have (unfortunately) been in existence since then, and continue in the 'super-ego' of every individual. *This grotesque, depreciative*

concept is a just punishment for the historical fact that the ethics of the Victorian era were merely a conventional morality, the creation of bilious praeceptores mundi. [Jung, 1973: 51 - emphasis added.]

Freud knew that conscience was a function of morality, and he knew, moreover, that moral laws were subject to fluctuation. Nevertheless, he made a harsh and ruthless superego a permanent fixture in the healthy human mind, thereby implying that there is a certain base level of harshness and ruthlessness that moral laws can never relax beyond. In Freud's own words, "even ordinary normal morality has [a] harshly restraining, cruelly prohibiting quality." As we have already seen, this claim is justified within Freudian theory in the first instance by the hypothesis of the Oedipus complex, which asserts that our fundamental instincts are incestuous on the one hand and bitterly hostile on the other, and so *must* be harshly restrained. A severe conscience became even more indispensable after Freud hypothesised the existence of a primal Death Instinct. If there were no cruelly prohibiting agency to watch over *that* instinct, we would all probably end up as murderers.³³

The Picture of Dorian Gray, read superficially, would seem to offer a spectacular vindication of this particular idea of Freud's. Having divested himself of conscience, Dorian Gray does indeed commit the

³³In the *Autobiographical Study*, Freud writes: "Pious souls, who cherish the thought of our remoteness from whatever is evil and base, will be quick to draw from the early appearance and the urgency of the prohibition of murder gratifying conclusions in regard to the force of [our] ethical stirrings.... Unfortunately this argument proves even more for the opposite contention. So powerful a prohibition can only be directed against an equally powerful impulse. What no human soul desires there is no need to prohibit; it is automatically excluded. [This is a notion in which Freud follows J. G. Frazer.] The very emphasis of the commandment *Thou shalt not kill* makes it certain that we spring from an endless ancestry of murderers, with whom the lust for killing was in the blood, as possibly it is to this day with ourselves" [1950c: 312].

ultimate crime: he stabs to death Basil Hallward, the painter of his portrait, and coolly disposes of the body. But as I have argued, the superficial reading of the novel is wrong. Dorian Gray does not divest himself of conscience, and therefore the book does not bear Freud out on this point. But if Dorian is, as the book unequivocally suggests, never free of conscience, then how *do* we read Dorian's gravest crime, the murder of Basil Hallward? Why does he do the deed? What does it have to tell us about the nature of conscience?

Let us return for a moment to our hypothetical version of the novel, in which Dorian Gray never becomes aware of the power of the portrait. As we have seen, this Dorian would not suffer. One might venture a further suggestion about this hypothetical Dorian Gray: he would not sin. He would not commit that large category of his transgressions - the excursions to ill-famed taverns, the unspecified sensual indulgences, the various emulations of Huysmans's *Des Esseintes* - which he commits only because he knows - or thinks - that the weight of conscience has been lifted from him. Dorian does not indulge in these activities because he is free of conscience, but because he has *been freed* of conscience. The difference is profound. A person who was free of conscience in the sense that he or she had never developed one would perhaps commit the venial sins of a child, but surely not the mortal ones of Dorian Gray. Dorian Gray has already experienced the crushing weight of conscience, and so when that weight is removed (or when he *believes* it to have been removed) he charges toward sin like a bull from an opened gate. Conscience creates an appetite for crime.

That it creates the impulse for Dorian's worst deed becomes clear enough when we examine the scene of that crime. Conscience is overwhelmingly present there, not just in the crudely literal sense that the murder takes place in front of the portrait. Conscience has bred the

state of intense distress that Dorian is in at the time of the murder. Moreover, it has imparted a special loathsomeness to Dorian's victim, Basil Hallward, "the friend who had painted the fatal portrait *to which all [Dorian's] misery had been due ...*" [123 - emphasis added]. This last factor means that Dorian's attack on Hallward is a kind of revenge attack on conscience, analogous to Dorian's subsequent assault, using the same knife, on the portrait itself.

But conscience is not merely the intended victim of the Hallward murder. In a symbolic way it is the *perpetrator of the crime*, as we can see in the sentences immediately preceding the deed:

Dorian Gray glanced at the picture, and suddenly an uncontrollable feeling of hatred for Basil Hallward came over him, as though it had been suggested to him by the image on the canvas, whispered into his ear by those grinning lips. The mad passions of a hunted animal stirred within him, and he loathed the man who was seated at the table, more than in his whole life he had ever loathed anything. [122 - emphasis added]

It is at this point that Dorian's gaze settles on a nearby knife, which he seizes and inserts into Basil Hallward's neck.

The italicised sentence is perhaps the most significant in the novel. It tells us unequivocally that the impulse on which Dorian murders emanates not from within his private self, but from the portrait. Our general feeling that Dorian Gray is driven to evil not by the absence of his conscience but by its oppressive *presence* is confirmed at the scene of his worst crime, where it is stressed that Dorian is a victim rather than an offender - "a hunted animal". This point receives further confirmation in the book's final chapter, when Dorian looks back at the Hallward

murder and feels no remorse for it: "Basil had painted the portrait that had marred his life. He could not forgive him that. *It was the portrait that had done everything*" [165 - emphasis added].

So the principle that "nothing is more rare in a man than an act of his own" is proved tragically right with respect to the operation of conscience. The murder is *not* an act of Dorian's own. It is an act of that fanatical enforcer of foreign values, his conscience. It is the Victorian moral conscience, and not the philosophies of Lord Henry Wotton, which lead Dorian so far astray - as Dorian makes plain when he says, after murdering the painter of the picture, "You don't know what he had made me suffer. Whatever my life is, he had more to do with the making or the marring of it than poor Harry has had" [130]. Lord Henry would applaud the murder only inasmuch as it proves correct his gloomy warnings about external domination of the self: "All influence is immoral.... To influence a person is to give him one's own soul. He does not think his natural thoughts or burn with his natural passions.... His sins, if there are such things as sins, are borrowed" [28]. Conscience exerts an immoral influence on Dorian Gray: his sins are borrowed from it.

"All modes of government are wrong," Wilde wrote in 1890, in the course of expounding (and thereby endorsing³⁴) the thought of the 'Chinese sage' Chuang Tzu. "They are unscientific, because they seek to alter the natural environment of man; *they are immoral because, by interfering with the individual, they produce the most aggressive forms of egotism...*; they are self-destructive, because they engender anarchy"

³⁴That Wilde approved of Chuang Tzu's subversive philosophies is obvious enough, but the point is proved by his conclusion: "It is clear that Chuang Tzu is a very dangerous writer, and the publication of his book in English, two thousand years after his death, is obviously premature, and may cause a great deal of pain to many thoroughly respectable and industrious persons. It may be true that the ideal of self-culture and self-development, which is the aim of his scheme of life, and the basis of his scheme of philosophy, is an ideal somewhat needed by an age like ours, in which most people are so anxious to educate their neighbours that they have actually no time left in which to educate themselves. But would it be wise to say so?" [1970b: 295].

[Wilde, 1970b: 289 - emphasis added]. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* reads like a chilling demonstration of this rule with regard to the government of conscience. Dorian's egotism does indeed turn aggressive and anarchic, because his Victorian conscience interferes with his individuality, preventing it from flowering in its natural and victimless form. The Victorian definition of moral purity was so exacting that it deemed everybody evil; Dorian's conscience is so keen to condemn his every deed that it ends up breeding wickedness. This is perhaps the ultimate critique of the Victorian moral conscience: that apart from anything else it doesn't even work, and with its excessive savagery will provoke things far worse than those it strives to prevent. Its efforts must backfire, like those of a parent who tries to make a child good by physically abusing it.

A clear echo of this intriguing idea can be found in Freudian theory. In a 1915 paper on 'Some Character-Types met with in Psychoanalytic Work', Freud identifies a type called the "criminal from a sense of guilt", whose crimes

are done precisely *because* they are forbidden, and because by carrying them out the doer enjoys a sense of mental relief. He suffered from an oppressive feeling of guilt, of which he did not know the origin, and after he had committed a misdeed the oppression was mitigated. The sense of guilt was at least in some way accounted for.

Paradoxical as it may sound, I must maintain that the sense of guilt was present prior to the transgression, that it did not arise from this, but contrarywise - the transgression from the sense of guilt. These persons we might justifiably describe as criminals from a sense of guilt....

But scientific work is not satisfied with establishing a departure from the norm. There are two further questions to answer: whence derives the obscure sense of guilt before the deed, and whether it is probable that this kind of causation plays a considerable part in the transgressions of mankind.

Prosecution of the former inquiry would hold out some hope of some explanation regarding the source of mankind's sense of guilt in general. The invariable result of analytic work is that the obscure sense of guilt derives from the Oedipus complex and is a reaction to the two great criminal intentions of killing the father and having sexual relations with the mother

The answer to the second question lies outside the scope of psychoanalytic work....

A friend has recently called my attention to the fact that the 'criminal from a sense of guilt' was recognized by Nietzsche. The pre-existence of the guilty consciousness, and the efficacy of the deed in rationalizing the feeling, gleam forth from the dark discourse of Zarathustra 'On the Pale Criminal' [1950i: 342-344 - emphasis added].

Not satisfied to identify departures from the norm, Freud makes the criminal from a sense of guilt a universal character by asserting that the "obscure sense of guilt" in question "derives from the Oedipus complex." But given that three thinkers at least - Nietzsche, Wilde and Freud - identified this strange phenomenon during the Victorian era, it is tempting to conclude that criminality from a sense of guilt *is* a departure from the norm, in the sense that it derives from the peculiarly excessive burden of guilt imposed by Victorian morality. Certainly neither Wilde nor Nietzsche wants us to think that criminality from a sense of guilt is a

universal phenomenon. They see it is as disease present only under stringent moral conditions. As Nietzsche put it:

The evil *which is now evil* overtakes [the Pale Criminal] who now becomes sick: he wants to do harm with that which harms him. *But there have been other ages and another evil and good.* [Nietzsche, 1969: 65-66 - emphasis added]

And in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as we have seen, the idea that a harsh conscience can become an active agent of evil comes as the clinching detail in a radical critique of Victorianism. As if to leave us in no doubt of the nature of this critique, Wilde briefly recapitulates its main elements during the novel's final few pages. He presents us with a little cameo of a drama in which conscience gives Dorian a last-straw demonstration of its unreasonableness, thereby provoking him to stab the portrait and so to kill himself.

This drama runs as follows. Dorian makes, yet again, an apparently genuine resolution to mend his ways. Presented with the opportunity to corrupt a young country girl, he refrains, deciding instead to "leave her as flower-like as I had found her" [158]. He is eager to see the portrait's registration of this good deed: "Surely it was not still so horrible as it had been?... Perhaps the signs of evil had already gone away. He would go and look" [165]. But the picture, his conscience, greets this last-ditch effort at reform with its usual mockery. "The thing was still loathsome - more loathsome, if possible, than before...." [166] This loathsomeness can be interpreted in one of two ways. One can suppose that the loathsomeness belongs to Dorian, and that the picture is only reflecting it. This reading compels the conclusion that it must have been, as the novel puts it, "merely vanity that had made [Dorian] do his one

good deed" [166]. On the other hand, one can suspect that the loathsomeness belongs entirely to the picture, is inherent in it: that "it was an unjust mirror, this mirror of his soul that he was looking at" [166].

As the novel races towards its conclusion, these two interpretations - the first the view of the portrait itself, the second the view of Dorian Gray - tangle for one last time. And Dorian Gray loses the battle:

For it was an unjust mirror, this mirror of his soul that he was looking at. Vanity? Curiosity? Hypocrisy? Had there been nothing more in his renunciation than that? There had been something more. At least he thought so. But who could tell?... No. There had been nothing more. Through vanity he had spared her. In hypocrisy he had worn the mask of goodness. For curiosity's sake he had tried the denial of self. He recognised that now. [166 - ellipsis in original]

Does Dorian finally recognise the truth here? I think not. What we have here, I think, is the moment at which the guttering flame of the essential Dorian is finally smothered by the weight of his conscience. If conscience keeps calling you wicked, you must eventually buckle under its weight, and agree. Dorian's knowledge of his own motives is snuffed out and replaced with the twisted view of conscience. It is like the parable of Nietzsche's which Freud was fond of quoting. "I did this," says my Memory. 'I cannot have done this,' says my Pride, and remains inexorable. In the end - Memory yields" [see Gay, 1988: 129]. Truth, in other words, is ultimately determined not by the testimony of the authentic self, but by that portion of the self which belongs to society.

But the essential Dorian has enough life left in him to make one final, all-or-nothing bid for autonomy. He assaults the portrait with a knife. Again this is an act of violence for which conscience is to blame. Like a battered wife turned murderous, Dorian attacks his conscience with a brutality which it has itself instilled in him:

He looked round, and saw the knife that had stabbed Basil Hallward.... As it had killed the painter, so it would kill the painter's work, and all that that meant. It would kill the past and when that was dead he would be free. It would kill this monstrous soul-life, and, without its hideous warnings, he would be at peace. He seized the thing, and stabbed the picture with it. [166-167]

Donald L. Lawler, a proponent of the orthodox reading of the novel, believes that this conclusion "tell[s] us that Dorian struck so that he would be free to pursue a life of pleasure without conscience tormenting him" [Lawler, 1988: 19]. But look at the above passage. Nowhere does it indicate that Dorian wants to be free "to pursue a life of pleasure." His aim is more modest, and far more worthy, than that. He just wants to be free. Free of conscience; at peace. It is the picture's "hideous *warnings* " which he wants to be at peace from; not, Wilde tells us one last time, its *reflections* of his wicked thoughts and deeds, but its forewarnings of them, which as we have seen really means its *causation* of them. And perhaps, by ending up dead on the floor, Dorian attains the closest thing to such freedom that his age had to offer.

"Dorian Gray, having led a life of mere sensation and pleasure, tries to kill conscience, and at that moment kills himself" [Hart-Davis, 1962: 259]. That is how Wilde, in a letter, characterised the novel's conclusion. But this statement does not necessarily amount to an

endorsement of conscience. Wilde might just as easily be lamenting the contemporary fact that conscience, though in essence a foreign agency, had so rampantly contaminated the authentic self that one could not eradicate the former without also killing the latter. Dorian's misery and demise were inevitabilities only in the Victorian context; why else would Wilde say, as he did in a different letter, that "Dorian is what I would like to be in other ages, perhaps" [quoted by Ellmann, 1988: 301]? Wilde did not write a whole novel about conscience in order to illustrate the banal proposition that you can't live without it. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* makes the far more radical suggestion that you can't, or at any rate couldn't in Wilde's age, live *with* it.

Two

“While all melts under our feet”: Decadent Literature in its Historical Context

The Picture of Dorian Gray shows us that Freud's ideas were in the air before they were Freud's ideas. But they were also in the air before they were Wilde's. I have started this inquiry with *Dorian Gray* precisely because it was an unoriginal book - one which crystallised, with remarkable economy, certain widely circulating literary motifs. Wilde was only one player in the literary overture to psychoanalysis. It is the purpose of this chapter to look at the entire orchestra, and to ask why it was that a body of literature which predated Freud's "discoveries" struck up so many distinctly Freudian themes.

The body of literature in question is the one of which Arthur Symons was thinking when he wrote in 1893: "The latest movement in European literature has been called by many names, none of them exact or comprehensive - Decadence, Symbolism, Impressionism, for instance" [1974a: 72]. Since the essay in which this sentence appeared was called 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', it seems fair to conclude that Symons ultimately found 'Decadence' to be the most congenial of the available terms.¹ Symons is right to point out that there is no perfect name for the movement. He is also right, I think, to settle on 'Decadence' as the least imperfect one. 'Impressionism' and 'Symbolism' are words associated with a particular kind of aesthetic *practice*; whereas the writers with whom we will be dealing were united more by their thematic

¹It should be added, though, that Symons wrote another essay, in 1899, called 'The Symbolist Movement in Literature'.

concerns than by their technical approach. ('Movement', indeed, is probably in itself a misleading word for a group of writings so loosely and informally connected.) 'Decadence' seems to be the term we need: a term flexible enough to designate the qualities common to the work of, say, the impressionist Pater, the symbolist Mallarmé, the aesthete Wilde - and, perhaps, the psychoanalyst Freud.

The term 'decadence' also has the virtue of gesturing towards the historical location of this brand of literature. True, the gesture is vague, but again a degree of vagueness is precisely what we need. *Fin-de-siècle*, another possible candidate, is too specific in its historical associations: for we will be dealing with a literature whose characteristic tropes can be found as early as the work of Poe, who was dead before the *siècle* was even half-way toward its *fin*. Wilde and Poe might not have shared any history, but their writings did share a *feeling* about history which the term decadence captures: the feeling that it was about to end. "The most representative [literature] of the day," as Symons put it, "is certainly not classic, nor has it anything to do with the old antithesis of the Classic, the Romantic. After a fashion it is no doubt a decadence; it has all the qualities that mark the end of great periods, the qualities that we find in the Greek, the Latin, decadence: an intense self-consciousness, a restless curiosity in research, an over-subtilizing refinement upon refinement, a spiritual and moral perversity" [1974a: 72].

I hope it is clear that I am not about to suggest that Freud was this kind of *writer*. My thesis is that Freud's psychological "discoveries" were so heavily anticipated by decadent writers that one must wonder whether they should be called his discoveries at all. This is not, of course, to suggest that Freud acquired his ideas directly from the decadents

themselves.² The evidence, on the contrary, suggests that Freud, guided by avowedly conservative literary preferences, tended to steer clear of such writers.³ "In choosing his favourites," as Peter Gay puts it, "he slighted the European avant-garde of his age" [1988: 166]. Freud liked Twain, Shaw, Kipling, Zola. He was spared the shock of finding in the decadents, as he found in Nietzsche, some alarming anticipations of his central ideas.

If Freud did not derive them directly from the decadents, then by what route did these decadent themes arrive in his work? The answer must lie in the soil from which both psychoanalysis and decadent literature grew: the Europe of the late nineteenth century. That Freud shared this soil with the decadents is an easy fact to forget, because Freud's productive phase came relatively late in his long life, whereas the decadents - the "tragic generation", as Yeats called them - tended to write, and to die, young. Freud was born in 1856, in the thick of the decadent generation: well before such men as Beardsley and Dowson (who were dead, nevertheless, before Freud had published anything of significance),

²When one considers the circumstances in which Freud formulated his theories, there is no basis at all for such a suggestion. But were one to go purely on the internal evidence - that is, were one to compare, in a contextual vacuum, the writings of the decadents with those of Freud - one might certainly entertain the possibility that they had exercised some direct influence on him. There is an amusing case of literary counterfeiting associated with this point. In 1934, the Italian writer Giovanni Papini published a fictional spoof purporting to be an interview with Sigmund Freud. Papini's sketch has Freud confessing that the likes of Mallarmé, Huysmans, Verlaine and Rimbaud exercised a decisive influence on his imagination: "my attention was attracted to the similarity between dreams and works of art and the importance of the language of symbols by the poetry of the Decadents. Psychoanalysis was born ... as a result of the scientific transposition of the literary schools I like best" [Papini, 1973: 99]. These literatures formed, the fictional Freud says, "the inspiration of all my later work.... Though I have the appearance of a scientist, I was and am a poet and a novelist" [quoted by Crews, 1995: 56, n6]. The plausibility of Papini's conceit is demonstrated by the fact that at least three reputable scholars have mistaken the sketch for a genuine interview. Henrik Ruitenbeek reprinted it in his 1973 book *Freud as We Knew Him*, along with the mild qualification that "its veracity has been questioned" [Ruitenbeek, 1973: 98]; James L. Rice quoted portions of it, on the assumption that it was authentic, in his 1993 book *Freud's Russia*; and Frederick Crews, reviewing Rice's book, requoted some of the bogus material in *The New York Review of Books*, before correcting his mistake in a subsequent number of that journal [see Crews, 1993a: 56 and 1993b].

³For an inventory of Freud's private library, see Trosman and Simmons, 1973.

and only a couple of years after Wilde and Rimbaud. One can remind oneself of the firmness of Freud's membership of the decadent milieu by thinking of his visit to Paris in 1885, only a year after the publication of *À Rebours*. There Freud frequented the theatres, wrote letters in praise of Sarah Bernhardt, and "walked about the streets, lonely and full of longings", as he would later put it [Freud, 1966: 150]. The previous year, also as a 29-year-old, a honeymooning Oscar Wilde had trod the same streets, rubbing shoulders not only with Bernhardt, for whom he wanted to write a play, but with Verlaine, Paul Bourget, Edmond de Goncourt. Physically at least, Freud's path and that of the decadents crossed. But that is hardly the point. The question is whether the decadent *geist* infected Freud at a deep enough level to shape the evolution of his theories - whether psychoanalysis is irredeemably a child of the decadent age.

"To fall down or away" - that is the meaning of *decadare*, the Latin root of the English word 'decadent' [see Gilman, 1979: 22]. In material terms, of course, the Europe of the late-Victorian period was doing the very opposite of falling down. But rampant material progress produced, in certain quarters, a curious side-effect: a subtle but profound metaphysical decay. "Progress and decline," as Ruskin observed during the 1860s, had become "strangely mixed in the modern mind" [quoted by Siegel, 1985: 199]. In the shadow of the Enlightenment a mould of doubt and discontent was growing. Scepticism was beginning, for some, to prove unhealthy. "There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve," wrote Matthew Arnold in 1879 [quoted by Daiches, 1969: 87].

Decadent literature was built on this lack of a foundation. The connection is neatly illustrated by Walter Pater's famous 'Conclusion' to *The Renaissance* (1873) - a piece which, according to Edmund Wilson, "fixed the ideal of a whole generation" [Wilson, 1947: 32]. The 'Conclusion' kicks off with an epigraph from Plato: "Somewhere Heraclitus says that all things vanish and nothing remains fixed." [Uglow, 1973: 148]. The implication that a similar anarchy defines Pater's own age is confirmed by his opening sentence. "To regard all things and principles of things as inconstant modes or fashions has more and more become the tendency of modern thought" [Pater, 1973: 39]. The scene is set, then: everything that Pater is about to say about the centrality of the individual, and the need to burn with a gemlike flame, will look all the more urgent against this backdrop of inconstancy. "[T]o treat life in the spirit of Art," as Pater said elsewhere, "is to make life a thing in which means and ends are identified" [quoted in Chai, 1990: 240]. The aesthetic project, in other words, was a response to a state of affairs in which life's means and ends were *not* identified. "While all melts under our feet," Pater says in the 'Conclusion', "we may well catch at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems ... to set the spirit free for a moment, or any stirring of the senses, strange dyes, strange flowers, and curious odours, or work of the artist's hands, or the face of one's friend" [1973: 41]. Decadent literature describes, or enacts, a fevered search for new principles of existence. Huysmans's *Des Esseintes*, one of the more vigorous participants in that quest, sees himself as a "galley-slave of life who puts out to sea alone, in the night, beneath a firmament no longer lit by the consoling beacon-fires of the ancient hope" [Huysmans, 1987: 220].

God's removal from that firmament had been resonantly announced by Nietzsche two years earlier, in his *Gay Science* (1882). "God is dead," Nietzsche has the character of the Madman say,

and we have killed him...All of us are his murderers What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving now? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? [Kaufmann, 1982: 95]

The breath of empty space was as scary as it was liberating. "[W]hen [Victorians] were sceptical," as David Daiches says, "they took no joy in their scepticism, as the men of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment had" [1969: 9]. For those Enlightenment thinkers, the solution advanced by Nietzsche's madman - "Must we not *ourselves become gods*, simply to seem worthy of [the killing of God]?" [Kaufmann, 1982: 96 - emphasis added] - might have seemed a feasible enough way of responding to God's death. But in the meantime science had discovered certain unflattering things about humanity which made it difficult for the late Victorians to think of themselves as God-like. John Fowles, writing in 1979 about the historical background of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, noted that:

The great nightmare of the respectable Victorian mind was the only too real one created by the geologist Lyell and the biologist Darwin. Until then man had lived like a child in a small room. They gave him - and never was a present less welcome - infinite

space and time, and a hideously mechanistic explanation of human reality into the bargain. Just as we 'live with the bomb', the Victorians lived with the theory of evolution. They were hurled into space. They felt themselves infinitely isolated. By the 1860s the great iron structures of their philosophies, religions and social stratifications were already beginning to look dangerously corroded to the more perspicacious. [Fowles, 1977: 140-141]

Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* had been published between 1830 and 1833, nearly thirty years before the *Origin of Species* (1859). Lyell proposed, among other radical things, that

the configuration of the earth's surface has been remodelled again and again since it was the habitation of organic beings, and the bed of the ocean has been lifted up to the height of some of the loftiest mountains. The imagination is apt to take alarm, when called upon to admit the formation of such irregularities of the crust of the earth, after it had become the habitation of living creatures. [Carey, 1995: 72]

This had alarming implications for the human race:

Amidst the vicissitudes of the earth's surface, species cannot be immortal, but must perish, one after the other, like the individuals which compose them. There is no possibility of escaping from this conclusion. [Carey, 1995: 75]

When Lyell's insights are digested by the literary sensibility, we get lines like these, from Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, written between 1833 and 1850.

The hills are shadows, and they flow
From form to form, and nothing stands;
They melt like mist, the solid lands,
Like clouds they shape themselves and go. [Carey: 75]

And after Darwin dealt the second, and more telling, blow of the combination, the rattled Victorian psyche was ready to produce a literature informed, or deformed, by an even more profound sense of unease: the literature of the decadents.⁴ Not that the decadents cursed Lyell or Darwin; on the contrary, they welcomed the way in which their discoveries helped to blur all external lines, to abolish all rigid distinctions. Pater, writing in 1867, declared that

Modern thought is distinguished from ancient by its cultivation of the 'relative' spirit in place of the 'absolute'.... To the modern spirit nothing is, or can rightly be known, except relatively and under conditions. The philosophical conception of the relative has been developed in modern times through the influence of the sciences of observation. Those sciences reveal types of life evanescing into each other by inexpressible refinements of change. They pass into

⁴We must also remember that an atmosphere of *political* uncertainty prevailed, thanks to the events of 1848. "The so-called revolutions of 1848 were but poor incidents," said Marx in 1856, "small fractures and fissures in the dry crust of European society. But they denounced [sic] the abyss. Beneath the apparently solid surface, they betrayed oceans of liquid matter, only needing expansion to rend into fragments continents of hard rock" [quoted by Berman, 1989: 19].

their opposites by accumulation of indefinable quantities. [Pater, 1920: 66]

Scientific discoveries about evanescence in the physical world do not, strictly speaking, have anything to do with a relativist epistemology. But Pater, infected by the relativist spirit, thought so. He also thought - and this suggestion is far more valid - that the rock-like certainties of Victorian morality looked less sturdy in the light of these new discoveries.

The moral world is ever in contact with the physical, and the relative spirit has invaded moral philosophy from the ground of the inductive sciences. There it has started a new analysis of the relations of body and mind, good and evil, freedom and necessity. Hard and abstract moralities are yielding to a more exact estimate of the subtlety and complexity of our life. [Pater, 1920: 67]

Pater praises inductive science for having detected the unconscious of nature, as it were, for revealing the fluid, amoral reality behind what had seemed so stable. "Think of all that subtly disguised movement," Pater urges, "which modern research has detected in what had seemed most substantial to the naked eye, the inattentive mind" [ibid]. Darwin, with his theory "that 'species' ... immutable though they seem now, as of old in the Garden of Eden, are fashioned by slow development", strikes Pater as the most salient of these modern researchers [Pater, 1922a: 20]. As the second principal avatar of modern relativism Pater names Hegel, "to whom nature and art and polity, aye and religion too, each in its long

historic series are but so many conscious movements in the secular process of the eternal mind" [19].⁵

It is interesting that Pater should have derived a philosophy of lazy drift from a thinker whom Karl Marx appropriated as the foundation for a robust and vigorous and even violent politics. But when Marx and Engels speak in *The Communist Manifesto* of "the selfish misconception that induces you [i.e. the bourgeois] to transform into eternal laws of nature and of reason, the social forms springing from your present mode of production and form of property - historical relations that rise and disappear in the process of production" [Marx and Engels, 1967: 100], their Hegelian deconstruction of bourgeois complacency does not differ substantially from Pater's - only the economic terminology distinguishes it.⁶ Nor was Hegel the only influence shared by Marx and Pater: Marx saw Darwin, too, as a theoretical ally, whose *Origin of Species* provided "a basis in natural science" for Dialectical Materialism [quoted by Wilson, 1972: 263].

But for Marx and Engels, of course, the deconstruction of present social forms was part of a larger project concerned with the creation of

⁵Hegel, as A. J. P. Taylor says, "made change itself the heart of his system.... Hegelian philosophy was a stroke of enlightenment. For the first time, thinkers made their peace with movement instead of insisting on a static universe. They were in fact fumbling towards the theory of evolution, which was perhaps the greatest creative idea of the nineteenth century" [1967: 8-9].

Another indication of what the decadent mind made of Hegel comes at the end of Wilde's "The Truth of Masks": [I]n art there is no such thing as a universal truth. A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true. And just as it is only in art-criticism, and through it, that we can apprehend the Platonic theory of ideas, so it is only in art-criticism, and through it, that we can realise Hegel's system of contraries. The truths of metaphysics are the truths of masks" [1970d: 32].

⁶And consider how closely the following excerpt from *The Communist Manifesto* mirrors Pater's vision of everything melting under our feet: "All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and men at last are forced to face ... the real conditions of their lives and their relations with their fellow men." This passage is cited by Marshall Berman in his *All That is Solid Melts into Air* [Berman, 1989: 21], which contains an illuminating discussion of the recurrent "melting vision" in Marx and its relation to modernity.

future ones. The movement involved in the processes of evolution, and in the functioning of the dialectic, mattered to Marx because it was movement *towards* something. For the decadents, on the other hand, process was all. Movement was an end in itself. The outcome of evolution was either irrelevant - Pater speaks of "Darwin and Darwinism, for which 'type' itself properly *is* not, but is only always *becoming*" [1922a: 19] - or downright contemptible: Wilde speaks of "the great Darwinian principle of the survival of the vulgarest" [1970a: 111]. The key thing about Darwin from the decadent perspective was that he had pulled up the anchor and set them adrift. As the Czech decadent critic Arnost Procházka wrote in a 1912 assessment of the *fin de siècle*: "An important chapter remains to be written on the relationship between progress and decay, about their close interconnections, their inseparability. Once careful research has been carried out into the points of contact between evolution and decadence, it will be found ... that they are synonyms" [quoted by Pynsent, 1989: 123].

The relativising tendency of Darwinism was compounded by anthropologists working in Darwin's wake. George Stocking, in his book *Victorian Anthropology*, explains that post-Darwinian anthropology, with its "rapid accumulation of information on the non-European peoples", validated the perception that "moral values varied in time and place - perhaps, in Darwinian terms, were 'adapted' to different environmental situations" [Stocking, 1987: 222]. Because the Victorian age insisted so stridently on the stability of its codes and values, the news that these things were mere conventions was bound to be inordinately liberating. "Races, laws, arts have their origins and end, are themselves

ripples only on the great river of organic life," Pater rejoiced; "and language is changing on our very lips" [Pater, 1922a: 21].

This last point, about relativity in language, was one sanctioned by the linguistic research of the period. In 1875 the American philologist William Dwight Whitney published *The Life and Growth of Language*. According to Saussure - many of whose key principles were anticipated by Whitney - Whitney "changed the axis of linguistics" with his discovery that "language is a *human institution*" [quoted by Jakobsen, 1971: xxxiv - emphasis added]. Whitney admitted the principle of evolution into language: "If the Darwinian theory is true," he wrote, "and man a development out of some lower animal, it is at any rate conceded that the last and nearest transition-forms have perished.... If they could be restored, we should find the transition-forms of speech to be, not at all a minor provision of natural articulate signs, but an inferior system of conventional signs ..." [Whitney, 1885: 291]. Language, then, was yet another place where stability and naturalness had proved to be illusions. Whitney showed language to be both

arbitrary and conventional.... For each object, or act, or quality, there are as many names as there are languages in the world, each answering as good a purpose as any other, and capable of being substituted for another in the usage of any individual. There is not in a known language a single item which can be truly claimed to exist 'by nature'; each stands in its accepted use 'by an act of attribution', in which men's habits, preferences, will, are the determining force.... There is no tie of necessity, but only of convenience.... [Whitney, 1885: 282]

The insights of linguists into the artificial nature of language had deep implications about our way of seeing things. The German philologist Karl Abel wrote in 1884: "It is clear that everything on this planet is relative and has independent existence only in so far as it is distinguished in its relations to and from other things.... Man has not been able to acquire even his oldest and simplest conceptions otherwise than in contrast with their opposite ..." [Freud: 1950b: 187].

I quote these observations of Abel's from a secondary source: 'The Antithetical Sense of Primal Words', Sigmund Freud's 1909 review of a pamphlet Abel had published in 1884. Why was Freud reviewing a 25-year-old pamphlet? Because of his belief that the antithetical nature of primal words confirms the psychoanalytic idea that the unconscious is a place of co-existing opposites - a notion Freud had first advanced back in *The Interpretation of Dreams*: "[t]he attitude of dreams towards the category of antithesis and contradiction is most striking. This category is simply ignored; the word 'No' does not seem to exist for a dream. Dreams show a special tendency to reduce two opposites to a unity or to represent them as one thing" [1950b: 184].

Freud's interest in Abel resoundingly confirms one's impression that there was something id-like about the processes that linguists had discovered behind language. When Freud is discussing Abel's finding that conceptual opposites can be traced to a common root in compound words - the words "old" and "young", for example, stem from the single primal word "oldyoung," "far" and "near" from "farnear", and so on - one thinks also of Freud's concept of the pleasure principle (*Lustprinzip*), which began its life as the "pleasure-unpleasure principle" (*Lust-Unlust Prinzip*). Its origins in linguistic ambiguity underline the relativism of Freud's concept. Pleasure and pain are not, for Freud, absolute qualities: they are measures of the ebb and flow of a continuous process. "[P]ainful

feelings are connected with an increase and pleasurable feelings with a decrease in stimulation" [1950d: 64]. In consequence, as Derrida puts it, "the definition of the pleasure principle is mute about pleasure, about its essence and quality. Guided by the economic point of view, this definition concerns only quantitative relations" [Derrida, 1987: 276].

To speak of relations rather than essence was to express a characteristic priority of the age - a priority both of science and of literature. The question is, which of these discourses was Freud contributing to when he introduced the spirit of relativity into the mind? Was he participating in the scientific tradition of Lyell, Darwin and Whitney, and identifying the fluid reality behind what had till then been presumed to be solid? Or was he, like Pater, or Wilde, or Huysmans, a mere commentator on the peculiar mental conditions which arose from these and other cultural shocks - an analyst of the decadent mind who mistook its troubled workings for permanent features of human psychology?

In order to answer this question, we will have to consider the various ways in which the decadents admitted the spirit of uncertainty into the fabric of their work. It is interesting to see how Wilde, for example, used linguistic scepticism to legitimise a more radical uncertainty. In 'A Chinese Sage', Wilde refers with apparent approval to the strange and ancient teaching of Hui Tzu, who pointed out that "a dog could be a sheep, because all names were arbitrary" [Wilde, 1970b: 291]. This perception that language is not an emanation of objects, but a human-made structure imposed on them, is put to interesting use in Wilde's work. "Language ... is the parent, and not the child, of thought," Gilbert asserts in 'The Critic as Artist' [1970a: 124]. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*,

Dorian reflects on the way that words “seemed to be able to give a plastic form to formless things.... Mere words! Was there anything so real as words?” [Wilde, 1988: 30]. A subtle but important extension of this line of thinking comes sixty pages later, with Dorian’s claim that “If one doesn’t talk about a thing, it has never happened. It is simply expression, as Harry says, that gives reality to things” [89]. In other words, language gives form not only to obviously formless things - thoughts, concepts - but to actual events and objects too. Was there *any* reality outside of language? Perhaps not: Pater, in the ‘Conclusion’, speaks of “objects in the solidity with which language invests them” [1973: 40].

In the decadent era, it seems, you did not have to be a professional linguist to see that no natural bond existed between word and thing. Public language was so wildly detached from the real, so conspicuously a system unto itself, that everybody became a Saussure. By falling ill, language had shown itself to be an organism - an organism in a state as parlous as Latin during its decadence, when it became, according to Huysmans’s *Des Esseintes*, “rotten through and through and hung like a decaying carcase, losing its limbs, oozing pus, barely keeping, in the general corruption of its body, a few sound parts ...” [Huysmans, 1987: 49].

The tatters were most shamelessly on show in moral language. “*Language*,” says Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), “cannot get over its coarseness and continues to speak of antitheses where there are only degrees and many subtleties of gradation ... likewise the incarnate tartuffery of morals ... twists the words in the mouths even of us men of knowledge” [Nietzsche, 1990: 55]. Nor did one have to be Nietzsche to perceive the artificiality of morals. Victorian morality, as we have seen in the previous chapter, did not really need scientists or philosophers to render it shaky. It was shaky enough already, precisely because it had tried to be too strong. Morality had overreached itself, and so

undermined itself; the gulf between public codes and private experience had become untenably large. "One has taken the value of [moral] values as given, as factual, as beyond all question," Nietzsche said in the *Genealogy of Morals* (1887); "one has hitherto never doubted or hesitated in the slightest degree in supposing 'the good man' to be of greater value than 'the evil man' ... " [1989: 20]. That kind of complacency would plainly no longer do.

The sorry clichés of respectable language were a sitting duck for decadent satire. "Morality is simply the attitude we adopt towards people whom we personally dislike," says Mrs Chevelly in *An Ideal Husband* [Wilde, 1983b: 207]. A playwright of today would hardly bother to base a joke on the perception that moral codes are a mere convention; but for Wilde that notion was still fresh enough to warrant attention - without being *so* novel as to cause offence to his audience, or to go over its head. This confirms the platitude that the decadent era was one of transition: old forms and conventions were dead, but the corpses were still decidedly warm.

A good deal of Wilde's humour derives from his location at this transitional moment. Richard Le Gallienne, in his book *The Romantic 90s*, called Wilde the "astonishing, impudent microcosm of the 1890s' chaos ... the synthesis of all these phenomena of change" [quoted by Gerber, 1960: 60]. Although the people in Wilde's plays and stories tend to act in the full knowledge that morality is a lie, they are still not quite ready to replace it with the truth. Instead we get codes, passwords, manifest lies, false identities, Bunburying - everything means something else. The only certainty about meaning is that it lies beyond what one says. "Whenever people talk to me about the weather," says Gwendolen in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, "I always feel quite certain that they mean something else" [Wilde, 1988: 329]. Even Lady Bracknell knows

that polite discourse consists - is *designed* to consist - of lies: "No woman should ever be quite accurate about her age. It looks so calculating" [1988: 376]. There is a routine scepticism here which reminds one of Freud's insistence that the surface content of a dream is always a sham, and the real meaning is necessarily, because of its unacceptable nature, *latent*. Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar - but much more frequently it isn't. For the decadents, moral codes were a form of repression, and literature a method of liberating the repressed material: thus Lord Alfred Douglas dared to speak of "the love that *dare not* speak its name."

In Wilde, the existence of latent indecency is so taken for granted that Lady Alroy, in 'The Sphinx Without a Secret', feels obliged to manufacture a covert life for herself: "a woman with a mania for mystery", she rents rooms in a shabby part of town "for the pleasure of going there with her veil down, and imagining she was a heroine" [Wilde, 1988: 218]. Lady Plymdale in *Lady Windemere's Fan* is similarly afraid of appearing to be decent:

It's most dangerous nowadays for a man to pay any attention to his wife in public. It always makes people think that he beats her when they're alone. The world has grown so suspicious of anything that looks like a happily married life. [Wilde, 1980: 34]

The language of manners, it seemed, meant the very opposite of what it said - a point illustrated by this Wildean exchange from Arthur Schnitzler's *Das Weite Land*:

FREIDRICH: Let's stay at home then, fine ... that's an end of it.

GENIA: I'll be right back ... I'll just put my hat on. [Schnitzler, 1980: 28]

The very titles of Wilde's works point ironically to the gap between surface meaning and latent meaning in Victorian public language. The husband in *An Ideal Husband* is not exactly ideal; the picture in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is not exactly a picture, and it is not exactly of Dorian Gray; 'The Portrait of Mr W. H.' is a forgery; *The Importance of Being Earnest* is about the importance of being frivolous, and Ernest is a false name - you can either be Ernest or earnest, but not both. *Lady Windemere's Fan*, according to its subtitle, is 'A Play About a Good Woman'; but really it is a play about two women. One of them is good on the surface, but commits an indiscretion. The other is a suspected prostitute, "a horrid woman ... absolutely inadmissible to society", who selflessly saves the first from humiliation - and thereby turns out to be "better than one thought her" [Wilde, 1980: 16, 87]. The subtitle refers not to the character of either woman, but to the inflexibility of the prevailing concept of 'Good'.

When Algernon in *The Importance of Being Earnest* is asked to deliver "the truth pure and simple", he responds by articulating what is one of the key principles of Wilde's art, and of decadent philosophy in general: "The truth is rarely pure and never simple" [1988: 326]. This aphorism hints at the way in which scepticism about moral codes (the truth, contrary to what such codes claim, is never pure⁷) unfolded into a scepticism about 'Truth' as such, which also was not as simple, as self-evident, as people thought. "Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style," Wilde asserts in 'The Decay of Lying' [1970d: 53]. Actually, Wilde

⁷A point which Jack reiterates when he says that: "the truth isn't quite the sort of thing one tells to a nice, sweet, refined girl" [1988: 336]. In George Egerton's 1894 story 'The Regeneration of Two' (see page 132 below) a female character demands the truth of a male one, who replies: "The truth? Does Fruen think she could stand the truth? Truth doesn't wear a fig-leaf!" [Egerton, 1983: 189]. Freud held similar beliefs: when sending a sexually frank early manuscript to his friend Wilhelm Fliess, he warned him to keep it away from his young wife [Gay, 1988: 62].

doesn't assert this: it is his character Vivian. But by making such a point within a dialogue, Wilde casts his relativist sentiment in an appropriately relativist form.⁸ Wilde's life itself has a certain dialogical quality: he hops from position to position, from pose to pose, concealing his true beliefs, if he had any, so thoroughly under his style that in the end one comes to see him as constituted by style, composed of nothing more than a series of disguises. But such inconsistency was actually a form of fidelity to the principle asserted by the title of his essay 'The Truth of Masks'. That essay ends, cheekily, the only way it logically can: in self-contradiction. "Not that I agree with everything that I have said in this essay. There is much with which I entirely disagree.... This essay simply represents an artistic standpoint, and in aesthetic criticism attitude is everything. For in art there is no such thing as a universal truth" [Wilde, 1970d: 32].

"There are no moral phenomena at all, only a moral interpretation of phenomena," wrote Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil* [1990: 96]. In a notebook of 1887 - the following year - Nietzsche broadened that formulation to cover *all* phenomena: "Against that positivism which stops before phenomena, saying 'there are only *facts*' I should say: no, it is precisely facts that do not exist, only *interpretations* ..." [Kaufmann, 1982: 458 - the italics are Nietzsche's].

This succinctly demonstrates the ease with which a bad case of moral scepticism could degenerate into full-blown epistemological scepticism. In that atmosphere of swirling relativism, could *anything* be trusted? Ibsen, in a letter of 1871, wrote: "Neither the conceptions of morality nor those of art are eternal. To how much are we really obliged

⁸He avoids, in other words, the logical inconsistency of affirming *as a truth* the idea that there is no such thing as truth.

to pin our faith? Who will vouch for it that two and two do not make five up in Jupiter?" [quoted by Jackson, 1976: 133]. Pater, writing in 1893, could not even vouch for it that two and two made four on *Earth*: "the idea of development is at last invading, one by one, as the secret of their explanation, all the products of mind, the very mind itself, the abstract reason; our certainty, for instance, that two and two make four" [Pater, 1922a: 20-21]. By 1897, Oscar Wilde for one had rid himself of doubt about the matter: he explained to a prison warder that he knew nothing about figures, except that two and two made five [Ellmann, 1988: 485].⁹

As trivial as it seems, Wilde's joke shows how the two great decadent themes, uncertainty and individualism, intersect. If truth is up for grabs, why not grab it? Why should there not be as many truths as there are individuals? "A truth ceases to be true," Wilde claimed, "when more than one person believes in it" [1988: 1205]. The decadents saw no reason why their creative impulses should stop at the threshold of Truth: they exploited the individualism implicit in relativism. Pater wrote, tendentiously, of similar developments in the time of Heraclitus: "And this rapid change, if it did not make all knowledge impossible, made it wholly relative.... Man, the individual, at this particular vanishing-point of time and place, becomes 'the measure of all things'" [Pater, 1922a: 16].

Pater's 'Conclusion' to *The Renaissance* is a superbly lyrical evocation of the same process, this "penetration of the self"¹⁰ occasioned by the unsatisfactory nature of all things external.

⁹In *Notes From Underground*, Dostoevsky's narrator invokes this same sum when attacking the question of individual free will. "Good heavens, gentlemen, what sort of free-will is left when we come to tabulation and arithmetic, when it will all be a case of twice two makes four? Twice two makes four without my will. As if free-will meant that" [quoted by Auden, 1974: 56].

¹⁰"Penetration of himself" was the phrase applied by Valéry Larbaud to what Paul Valéry did during his spells of self-inflicted solitude [quoted by Wilson, 1947: 67]. "The study of myself for its own sake," wrote Valéry, "the comprehension of that attention itself and the desire to trace clearly for myself the nature of my own existence, almost never abandoned me. This secret disease alienates one from letters, despite the fact that it has its source in them" [ibid., 65].

At first sight experience seems to bury us under a flood of external objects, pressing upon us with a sharp importunate reality, calling us out of ourselves in a thousand forms of action. But when reflection begins to act upon those objects they are dissipated under its influence; ... each object is loosed into a group of impressions ... in the mind of the observer. And if we continue to dwell on this world ... of impressions ... it contracts still further; the whole scope of observation is dwarfed to the narrow chamber of the individual mind. Experience, already reduced to a swarm of impressions, is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without. Every one of those impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world.... [T]o a single sharp impression ... what is *real* in our life fines itself down. [Pater, 1973: 39-40 - emphasis added]

That which we can only conjecture to be without. The decadent assertion of subjectivity clearly went far beyond that of the Romantics. Decadent individualism amounted, at its most extreme, to what Graham Hough calls an “atomised and solipsist epistemology” [1961:140]. There is no Byronic vigour about the decadent ethic: theirs is a cocooned, unhealthy, negative individualism: not a lamp-like projection of the self into the world, but a snail-like *retreat* from the world, and into the shell of the self. One might even call their attitude childish. Mallarmé’s desire to put a cloud of smoke between himself and the world¹¹ was typical of

¹¹Wilde, evidently, also thought of the cigarette as an anti-social instrument. Curtain-called at the first performance of *Lady Windemere’s Fan*, he took to the stage with one smouldering between his fingers. Taking a puff, he began: “Ladies and gentlemen, it’s

the decadents' insolent and insular attitude. Where the Romantic self was in harmony with nature, the decadent position is summed up by the title of Huysmans's great novel: *À Rebours - against nature*. "Nature is so uncomfortable," complains Wilde's Vivian, in 'The Decay of Lying'. "Grass is hard and lumpy and damp, and full of dreadful black insects. I prefer houses to the open air. In a house we all feel of the proper proportions. Everything is *subordinated to us*, fashioned for our use and our pleasure. Egotism itself ... is entirely the result of indoor life" [Wilde, 1970d: 34 - emphasis added].

Once again, Wilde's flippancy harbours a serious decadent theme. When decadent literature did concern itself with landscapes or objects - things beyond the self - they were almost invariably of an *artificial* kind: things "fashioned for our use and pleasure". Not the countryside, but the city; not daylight, but streetlamps;¹² not milkmaids, but whores.

Ah London! London! our delight,
Great flower that opens but at night,

wrote Richard Le Gallienne in 'A Ballad of London' [Stanford, 1965: 196]. Lambs, butterflies and bumblebees are largely absent from the decadent canon; daffodils yielded to "the iron lilies of the Strand" [Le Gallienne again, *ibid.*]. To the decadent sensibility, as Arthur Symons explained, "there is no necessary difference in artistic value between a good poem about a flower in the hedge and a good poem about the scent in a sachet" [quoted by Jackson, 1976: 70].

perhaps not very proper to smoke in front of you, but ... it's not very proper to disturb me when I am smoking" [Ellmann, 1988: 346n]. This offended, among others, Henry James [*ibid.*: 347]. When Lord Henry Wotton first appears he is lying on a divan, "smoking, as was his custom, innumerable cigarettes" [Wilde, 1988: 18].

¹²Aubrey Beardsley claimed to be unable to draw by natural light; when working in the daytime he would close all the curtains and work by the light of candles [see Stanford, 1965: 48].

In its purest form, however, decadent literature had no time for any objects, even artificial ones. Everything outside the self was valueless. Yeats, writing in 1898:

I remember that when I first began to write I desired to describe outward things as vividly as possible.... And then quite suddenly I lost the desire of describing outward things, and found that I took little pleasure in a book unless it was spiritual and unemphatic. I did not then understand that the change was from beyond my own mind, but I understand now that writers are struggling all over Europe ... *against that 'externality' which a time of scientific and political thought has brought into literature.* [1961: 89 - emphasis added]

One way in which Yeats tellingly reversed those old priorities came in 'A Vision', in which he used the phases of the moon to represent various types of human personality. At one end of the spectrum stood the purely objective mind, which a more obedient child of the Enlightenment than Yeats might have associated with a full moon: Yeats, however, equated it with complete darkness. It was the purely *subjective* mind which he represented with the full moon. Illuminating the *inner* world had become literature's proper task: as Arthur Symonds said of Symbolism, it was a literature which had rid itself of the "old bondage of exteriority"; a literature "in which the visible world is no longer a reality, and the unseen world no longer a dream ..." [1974d: 83].

"Epochs which are regressive, and in the process of dissolution, are always subjective; whereas the trend in all progressive epochs is objective" [quoted by Hughes, 1994: 13]. This aphorism of Goethe's was an accurate prophecy of the decadent scenario. The decadents responded

to dissolution by defiantly asserting their subjectivity. But that stance proves, when one examines it, to be quite paradoxical. To make the private self "the measure of all things" is scarcely to triumph over dissolution: for what *is* dissolution anyway, if not the collapse of Truth into truths, the disintegration of objectivity into a million subjectivities? Looked at that way, the decadent turning-inward was a matter of inevitability, not of choice - it was a part of the crisis, a steepening of the slide, rather than a way of arresting it.

But did the decadents really *want* to arrest the crisis? Didn't they, rather, want to revel in it? These questions have no definitive answer. In any genuinely decadent sensibility, the urge to overcome chaos was accompanied by an equally strong urge to celebrate it. The decadents were uncertain about uncertainty. It seems only natural that the era from which the decadent self emerged should also have produced the concept of ambivalence.¹³

Ambivalence is certainly one of the dominant notes of Pater's 'Conclusion'. Having named inconstancy as the defining quality of his age, Pater doesn't seem to know exactly how to feel about it. All is melting under our feet: so what should we do? Half the time Pater seems inclined to wallow in this dissolution, to celebrate it with images of whirlpools and floods and flames. But he also wants to treat it as a crisis requiring immediate action: a pretext for a new individualist religion. This confusion seems to permeate Pater's picture of the self. On the one hand, the self is a kind of temple in which one can take refuge from the surrounding chaos; on the other, the self is the site of a flux wholly continuous with the flux beyond it. For the body, says Pater, is merely a concurrence of forces whose action "extends beyond us.... Far out on

¹³The term was not coined by Freud, but by the Swiss psychiatrist and mentor of Jung, Eugen Bleuler. Schizophrenia and autism were two more of his coinages which seem particularly applicable to the decadent psyche [see Gay, 1988: 198].

every side of us these elements are broadcast, driven by many forces.... That clear perpetual outline of face and limb is but an image of ours under which we group them - a design in a web, the actual threads of which pass out beyond it" [Pater, 1973: 39]. Is mobility to be escaped from or embraced? The way Pater answers this question in his *Plato and Platonism* is significant: "Mobility! We do not think that a *necessarily undesirable* condition of life, of mind, of the physical world around us. 'Tis the dead things, we may remind ourselves, that after all are most entirely at rest, and [we] might reasonably hold that motion ... covers all that is best worth being" [1922: 22 - emphasis added].

Not ... necessarily undesirable. This is a fairly half-hearted endorsement of mobility. We must "remind ourselves" that movement is a good thing, by recalling that the alternative is stasis, which is bad. This position is more intelligible once we remember that the mobility of which Pater must primarily be thinking, namely the decay and dissolution that characterised the decadence, was conceptual rather than physical. To be uncertain about concepts (what is good, what is evil, what is truth?) is unpleasant, giddy - but is nevertheless preferable to the immobile alternative: the old certainties.

Those old certainties, of course, were in practice far from dead. The Victorian moral order might have been deprived, in the eyes of certain intellectuals, of spiritual and rational sanction: but in legal terms its authority remained intact. More than intact - it was enforced with uncommon brutality. To take a notorious example: Wilde owed his imprisonment not to some archaic statute, but to an Act passed in 1885 [See Ellmann, 1988: 386] - an Act which had little apparent regard for the way in which post-Darwinian anthropologists, say, might have decentred the concept of 'gross indecency'. In other words, the old Absolutes were for all practical purposes still in force. While the decadents engaged in

their fevered search for new values, the bulk of the community had probably not even begun to question the old ones. And so it did not hurt the decadents to stress, now and again, the elementary point that there *was* a crisis going on; and that the valueless freefall, as chilly as it sometimes got, was in any case preferable to a blind adherence to the desiccated, discredited old truths. To wallow in chaos was a way of exhibiting one's contempt for such stubborn, complacent old buffers as Wilde's Lord Caversham, who rails haughtily against modern tendencies in manners, and bemoans everything that happens "nowadays".¹⁴ Caversham's son, the "flawless dandy" Lord Goring, embodies the cool side of the decadent sympathy to decay: "I don't like principles, father. I prefer prejudices" [Wilde, 1983b: 146, 260]. The decadent spirit has been likened more than once to the spirit of the 1960s,¹⁵ and in the generation gap between these two Lords one can see the point of that comparison. The decadents were often ready to overlook the gravity of the crisis, if by revelling in it they could offend the Richard Nixons of the time.¹⁶ "We live, I regret to say, in an age of surfaces," says the venerable Lady Bracknell. Any trend lamented by the likes of her couldn't be all bad.

And yet to a substantial extent the decadents did share Lady Bracknell's regret, did crave depth, did want to believe: not, of course, in the old values,¹⁷ but in ones freshly forged. The story of the typical

¹⁴Freud, in *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, admitted that he too was almost provoked to satire by the conduct of certain similar buffers: "I have certainly heard of some people ... who are scandalized by [my] therapeutic method ... I am too well acquainted with the respectability of these gentry to excite myself over them. I shall avoid the temptation to write a satire upon them" [1990b: 82].

¹⁵ See, for example, Daiches 1969: 5, and Pynsent, 1989: *passim*.

¹⁶In *À Rebours*, Des Esseintes finds that elderly relatives are a bore. "These descendants of medieval warriors, these last scions of feudal families, appeared to Des Esseintes in the guise of crotchety, catarrhal old men, endlessly repeating insipid monologues and immemorial phrases.... The young man felt a surge of ineffable pity for these mummies entombed in their Pompadour catafalques behind rococo panelling; these crusty dotards who lived with their eyes forever fixed upon a nebulous Canaan, an imaginary land of promise" [Huysmans, 1987: 20-21].

¹⁷There were, though, several decadents who did embrace organised religion in the twilight of their careers: Wilde and Huysmans are two obvious examples. It can be argued

decadent hero takes the form of a restless, experimental quest for physical or metaphysical satisfaction - this is true of Marius the Epicurean, of Dorian Gray, of Des Esseintes, who calls himself an "unbeliever who would fain believe" [Huysmans, 1987: 220]. Wilde, in 'De Profundis', speaks of the "appetite without distinction, desire without limit, and formless greed" that hastened his own downfall [in Hart-Davis, 1986: 191]. The decadents uttered sighs of despair over the same emptiness that elsewhere they saw no need to fill. Often one can find these conflicting attitudes in the space of a single work: as in Rimbaud's 'Bad Blood', in which what seems to be an ecstatic celebration of need - "Hunger, thirst, shouts, dance, dance, dance, dance!" - is followed a page later by despair: "Ah! I am so forsaken that I could dedicate to any divine image that came along all my urges towards perfection" [Rimbaud, 1986: 308, 309].

Such urges generally found their way to one or both of two divinities: the Self and the work of Art. For the decadents, the line between these things was thoroughly blurred. The self had to be a work of art, and art had to be unmistakably, sometimes unintelligibly, a work of the self. Individualism was an aesthetic as well as an ethic: "Art," said Wilde, "is the most intense form of individualism that the world has known" [quoted by Ellmann, 1973: 97]. Given this relationship, it is unsurprising that we find in the decadent artwork the same ambivalence to metaphysical decay that we have observed in the decadent self. On the one hand, art represented a kind of bulwark against decay (Lord Alfred

that Wilde's conversion had more to do with the aesthetics of religion than its substance. As Pater once said, "The Church of England is nothing to me apart from its ornate services" [quoted by Aldington, 1948: 21]. But in any case, the finding of God is not inconsistent with the decadent quest for orientation in a life devoid of values. Remember Barbey d'Aurevilly's oft-quoted verdict on *À Rebours* - that its author would soon have to choose either the muzzle of a pistol or the foot of the cross [quoted by Baldick, 1987: 12].

Douglas, for example, wrote of his desire "Only to build one crystal barrier/Against this sea which beats upon our days" [in 'The City of the Soul', Symons, 1928: 38]. But decadent art was irretrievably submerged in that sea, too. It embodied the chaos through turbulence of theme and anarchy of form. "Let my style capture all the sounds of my time," wrote Freud's fellow Viennese Karl Kraus. "This should make it an annoyance to my contemporaries, but later generations should hold it to their ears like a seashell in which there is the music of an ocean of mud" [Zohn, 1984: following page 156].

This ambivalence of decadent art is caught by Yeats in a metaphor he applied to Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*: it "taught us," Yeats wrote, "to walk upon a rope tightly stretched through serene air, and we were left to keep our feet upon a swaying rope in a storm ... " [Yeats, 1955: 302]. The swaying rope is at once a passage through the storm and a part of it. Unlike a sturdy Classical bridge, it doesn't rise comfortably above the turmoil. Yeats himself can be seen implementing the swaying rope principle in his 'Song of the Happy Shepherd':

But O, sick children of the world,
Of all the many changing things
In dreary dancing past us whirled,
To the cracked tune that Chronos sings,
Words alone are certain good." [Symons, 1928: 168]

Words alone, in this decrepit age, are the only certain good: and yet what do the words concern themselves with but *the age itself*, which Yeats evokes in typical decadent style with images of sickness, change, the whirling dance of disintegration. As for the *formal* registration of that

discord, it is worth noting that the line about the cracked tune also sounds like a cracked tune.

*

When used according to the principle that words alone are certain good, language is bound to assume peculiar qualities. Like Victorian public discourse, decadent language tended to shun the task of representing the real. "Unfortunately," lamented Arthur Symonds, "words can convey facts" [1974b: 87]. The decadents' campaign against representation is of course most evident in their poetry, particularly that of the Symbolists. But even the prose tends to soar clear of mere signification. The first poem in Yeats's *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* is actually a piece of critical prose - Pater's reverie on the 'Mona Lisa', from *The Renaissance* - chopped into lines. It was Pater's practice, Yeats tells us, to draft each sentence on an individual page: not in order to clarify its meaning, but in the interests of "isolating and analysing its rhythm" [Yeats, 1941: viii].¹⁸ The resulting prose, Max Beerbohm complained, read as if English were being "treat[ed] ... as a dead language ..." [quoted by Bergonzi, 1973: 20]. If language was becoming, as Gautier put it, "mottled with the greenness of decomposition" [Quoted by Jackson, 1976: 136], that was at least partially because the decadents wilfully deprived words of the nourishment of reality, striving instead to make language a purely formal system: "music before all things", urged Verlaine [quoted by Stanford, 1965: 39]. The literature of the decadents, then, seems to fit snugly into Valéry's tendentious definition of literature in general as "an art which is based on the *abuse* of language - that is, it is based on language as a creator of illusions, and not on language as a means of transmitting realities" [quoted by Wilson, 1947: 284].

¹⁸Yet it was the meaning of Pater's prose poem that appealed to Sigmund Freud. See below, page 158.

There was, though, a more rarefied order of reality that decadent language *was* required to transmit: inner reality. The Symbolists in particular insisted that language be subjectivised, that words be made to conform to the craggy contours of the private self. Rather than submitting one's private vision to the tyranny of form, form had to submit to it. "The one certainty is, that society is the enemy of man, and that formal art is the enemy of the artist," said Arthur Symons [1974e: 85]. Language had to be shattered, reformed, used suggestively, obliquely - anything, so long as the poet's essence was not violated. If Symbolist language is formless and murky, that is because this is the condition of the self it is required to reflect.

But there is an interesting paradox here. Decadent language sought to detach itself from history, to repudiate the real, to serve only the private self; in consequence, it became mottled, moribund, *decadent* - and thereby *did* end up reproducing the qualities of the age. In that sense it was a curious form of realism - a point taken up by Arthur Symons, writing in 1896:

For its very disease of form, this literature is certainly typical of a civilisation grown over-luxurious, over-inquiring, too languid for the relief of action, too uncertain for any emphasis in opinion or in conduct. It reflects all the moods, all the manners, of a sophisticated society; *its very artificiality is a way of being true to nature*: simplicity, sanity, proportion - the classic qualities - how much do we possess them in our life, our surroundings, that we should look to find them in our literature - so evidently the literature of a decadence? [Symons, 1974a: 72 - emphasis added]

Since we are exploring the connections between decadent literature and psychoanalysis, we should be excited to see that Symons names *sanity* as one of the qualities most conspicuously lacked by decadent literature, and by the decadent society it reflects. Earlier in the same piece, Symons has made the same point even more emphatically: "If what we call the classic is indeed the supreme art - those qualities of perfect simplicity, perfect sanity, perfect proportion, the supreme qualities - then the representative literature of today, interesting, beautiful, novel as it is, is really a new and beautiful and interesting disease" [Symons, 1974a: 72].

The notion that decadent literature was sick literature, written by the ill for the ill, was a common one. We encountered it, indeed, at the very outset of this thesis, in the mind of the patient of Ferenczi who considered madness to be the salient shared trait of Wilde and Nietzsche (and, by implication, the psychoanalyst Jung).¹⁹ By and large the decadents were happy to foster this impression. "*Je suis l'Empire a la fin de la Decadence*," Verlaine wrote in '*Langeur*', diagnosing in himself a condition which reproduced the sickness of the age. In *À Rebours*, Des Esseintes relishes the literature of his decadent contemporaries because it is "a literature attacked," like himself, "by organic diseases, weakened by intellectual senility, exhausted by syntactical excesses, sensitive only to the curious whims that excite the sick, and yet eager to express itself completely in its last hours, determined to make up for all the pleasures it has missed, afflicted on its death-bed with a desire to leave behind the subtlest memories of suffering.... This was the death-agony of the old tongue which, after going a little greener every century, had now reached the point of dissolution..." [Huysmans, 1977: 199-200].

In some cases, decadent writers had genuine physical illnesses which lent their works a peculiar timeliness. Ernest Dowson, a frail

¹⁹See my 'Introduction'.

consumptive, lived only to the age of thirty-three. Aubrey Beardsley, another consumptive, didn't even make thirty. Wilde, in all probability, contracted syphilis early in his life, and suffered a prolonged private decay which Edmund Wilson, for one, related to the "theme of impending collapse" in his writings [Wilson, 1951: 341]. Richard Ellmann, discussing Wilde's contraction of the disease, speculates: "perhaps now the parable of Dorian Gray's secret decay began to form in his mind, as the spirochete began its journey up his spine to the meninges" [Ellmann, 1988: 91].

But in general the sickness suffered by decadent artists was of a less specific kind. *À Rebours* is no doubt the paradigmatic work of the decadence, and the "general nervous trouble" suffered by its protagonist Des Esseintes is probably the aptest description of the malady that afflicted decadent characters and artists alike [Huysmans, 1987: 211]. "I think that perhaps our form of lyric, our insistence upon emotion which has no relation to any public interest, gathered together overwrought, unstable men," Yeats wrote in his *Autobiographies* [Yeats, 1955: 300].

In 1892, a Hungarian-born physician living in Paris, and writing in German, produced a singularly nasty work of criticism which took the decadents at their word. Max Nordau's *Degeneration* set itself the task of "investigating," in Nordau's own account, "the tendencies of the fashions in art and literature ... [and] of proving that they have their source in the degeneracy of their authors, and that the enthusiasm of their admirers is for manifestations of more or less pronounced moral insanity, imbecility, and dementia" [Nordau, 1968: viii]. Nordau condemned as mentally degenerate not only the decadents, but just about every writer who had recently set pen to paper - his list included writers like Tolstoy, Zola, Ruskin, as well as more obvious targets like Verlaine ("a repulsive degenerate subject with an asymmetric skull and

Mongolian face ... a dotard who manifests the absence of any definite thought in his mind by incoherent speech, meaningless expressions and motley images. In lunatic asylums there are many patients whose disease is less deep-seated and incurable than is that of this irresponsible circulaire at large ... ") [Nordau, 1968: 128].

Bernard Shaw, pillorying *Degeneration* in his pamphlet *The Sanity of Art*, called it "a bookful of blunders tacked on to a mock scientific theory picked up at second hand from a few lunacy doctors with a literary turn ..." [100-101]. But lunacy doctors had a right, perhaps almost a duty, to concern themselves with decadent literature - not merely because it proclaimed its own lunacy, but because that lunacy mirrored a mysterious, and all-too-real, phenomenon of the time.

"Repress and repress": The Decadent Disease

"It is a pretty widespread opinion that nervous diseases, and especially hysteria, have alarmingly increased during the last decades, and that they are about to increase much more." The writer is William Hirsch, a German who in 1894 produced, in response to Nordau's book, a work called *Genius and Degeneration*. Hirsch goes on:

In all civilized countries, we are told, and in every stratum of the population, a weakness of the nervous system manifests itself of which our forefathers had no knowledge. Neurasthenia and hysteria spread wider and wider, like a devastating epidemic.... 'Whither is this to lead, and how is it to end?' lament some solicitous prophets who already see yawning before them the gulf

by which the enervated human race is about to be swallowed up.
[Hirsch, 1897: 170-171]

The term "neurasthenia" (*neuro* for nerve and *asthenia* for weakness) had itself been coined specifically to account for this peculiarly modern ailment. An American neurologist named George M. Beard had come up with the word in 1869. F. G. Gosling, in his book *Before Freud: Neurasthenia and the American Medical Community, 1870 - 1910*, explains that Beard's term

gave legitimacy to a group of mystifying complaints tormenting the lives of an unknown number of Americans.... The term has no equivalent in modern medicine, but from the late nineteenth century until Freud's psychological terms were accepted in the 1910s and 1920s, *neurasthenia* was used to characterize practically every nonspecific emotional disorder short of outright insanity, from simple stress to severe neuroses. Neurasthenics ... complained of vague symptoms such as insomnia, headache, fatigue, dyspepsia, depression.... Lacking empirical evidence to prove neurasthenia's existence, Beard naturally turned to the intellectual authorities of the day to construct an etiology for the disease.... Arguing that cultural evolution had outstripped the pace of individual evolution, he maintained that specific features of the young American society - in particular the telegraph, the railroads, the periodical press, the sciences, and the atmosphere of political and religious liberty - had increased mental demands on Americans, especially on the urban professionals who labored with

their heads rather than their hands....²⁰ Beard believed that neurasthenia was also increasing in the industrialized nations of Europe, but that it would be at least twenty-five years before the incidence of the disease among Europeans approached that already reported in the United States.... So successful was [his] explanation that neurasthenia, or 'nervousness,' was to become turn-of-the-century America's primary mental disorder that still fell short of insanity, and a disease symbolically identified with the period. If not an epidemic, at least it seemed to be increasing at an alarming rate. By 1900 a substantial body of literature on the disease had appeared in textbooks, medical journals, and popular periodicals across the country. [Gosling, 1987: 9-10, 11, 13]

But as we have seen via Hirsch and Nordau, the phenomenon was by no means confined to America. As early as 1831, an English physician had identified the 'wear and tear syndrome', an ailment he supposed to be peculiarly English, and which he attributed to the stresses of industrialization [Webster, 1995: 185]. Paris was known in the 1880s, when Freud studied there under Charcot, as "the hysteria capital", and hysteria as the "Parisian disease" [Evans, 1991: 9].

Decadent literature, then, coincided with a kind of explosion of neuroticism. "Modern nervousness," as Freud himself would write in 1908, "under our present social conditions is rapidly spreading" [Freud, 1950j: 77]. The essay in which Freud makes this observation is "'Civilized' Sexual Morality and Modern Nervousness." As its title suggests, Freud's paper traces the problem to one particular element of modern society: its harsh sexual morality. Before advancing this novel

²⁰"Modern life," Wilde wrote in *De Profundis*, "is complex and relative. Those are its two distinguishing notes" [Hart-Davis, 1986: 188].

theory, though, Freud acknowledges that most experts were taking, *à la* Beard, a broad sociological approach to the mystery. "Neurologists," he says, "have loudly proclaimed the connection between the 'increasing nervousness' of the present day and modern civilized life." He proceeds to quote at length the observations of one such neurologist, the German Wilhelm Erb, writing in 1893:

Are these [social] causes of nervousness which have been put before you so markedly on the increase under modern conditions of life as to declare these conditions responsible? This question can be answered without hesitation in the affirmative, as a cursory glance at our modern life and its character shall show.... The demands on the ability of the individual in the struggle for existence have enormously increased, and he can meet them only by putting forth all his mental powers; at the same time the needs of the individual, and the demand for enjoyment, have increased in all circles; unprecedented luxury is displayed by classes hitherto wholly unaccustomed to any such thing; irreligion, discontent, and covetousness are spreading widely through every degree of society ... political, religious, and social struggles, party-interests, electioneering, endless associations of every kind heat the imagination and force the mind to ever greater effort ... life in large cities is constantly becoming more elaborate and more restless. The exhausted nerves seek recuperation in increased stimulation, in highly-seasoned pleasures, only thereby to become more exhausted than before; modern literature is concerned predominantly with the most questionable problems, those which stir all the passions - sensuality and the craving for pleasure, contempt of every fundamental ethical principle and every ideal

demand; it brings pathological types, together with sexual psychopathic, revolutionary and other problems, before the mind of the reader. [Freud, 1950j: 78-79]

But Freud chastises Erb and his kind for missing what he sees as the crucial point: it is one aspect, and one aspect only, of modern civilisation which is at the root of the sickness. "Anyone who understands how to penetrate to the factors conditioning nervous illness will soon be convinced that its increase in our society originates in the greater stringency of sexual restraint" [89].

This is not the place to go too deeply into the medical and sociological objections to Freud's sexual etiology of neuroses.²¹ But the

²¹A brief survey of some of the relevant arguments does, however, seem to be in order. Webster [1995], who points out that hysteria has all but disappeared in this century [71], examines claims, some of them made before Freud came along, that it is a non-existent condition, a mere label which physicians stick on any disorder for which science has yet to find an organic explanation [529-547].

If such claims are right, then the patients whom Freud diagnosed as hysterics, and whose condition he ascribed to repression of sexual desire, must in fact have been suffering from organic disorders. This was certainly true of at least one of Freud's patients. The scandalous affair of Emma Eckstein occurred at the very beginning of Freud's psychoanalytical career. Unearthed by Jeffrey Masson [1984], the case involved a 30-year-old patient of Freud's who suffered from "stomach ailments and menstrual problems" [Masson, 1984: 57]. Freud referred her to his friend Wilhelm Fliess, who in early 1895 surgically removed the turbinate bone from Eckstein's nasal cavity, in accordance with his quackish "nasal reflex" theory of neurosis, which held that conditions in the nose governed symptoms in other parts of the body. In the wake of the operation Eckstein suffered swelling and haemorrhaging, and a fetid odour wafted from the incision site. Some fourteen days after the first operation another surgeon, in Freud's presence, re-opened Eckstein's nasal cavity in quest of the problem: and discovered that Fliess had left at least half a metre of gauze packed in there. The surgeon pulled the gauze free, provoking a massive haemorrhage which Eckstein was lucky to survive. So Eckstein's sufferings in the wake of the operation were not, as Freud and Fliess had suspected, hysterical symptoms: "we had done her an injustice," Freud wrote to his friend; "she was not at all abnormal, rather, a piece of iodoform gauze had gotten torn off as you were removing it and stayed in for 14 days, preventing healing; at the end it tore off and provoked the bleeding" [64]. But then, in April 1896 - that is, a year later - Freud informed Fliess that he had made theoretical developments which let Fliess off the hook, by revealing that Eckstein's "episodes of bleeding were hysterical, were occasioned by longing" [100]. "There is no doubt," Freud asserted in June 1896, "that her haemorrhages were due to wishes; she has had several similar incidents, among them actual simulations, in her childhood..." [ibid.].

Stewart [1976] argues that Freud may have opposed the popular view that nervous disease was organic, and therefore perhaps hereditary, out of distaste for its implicit racism: "Freud's limitations on the role of heredity in mental disorders, and its

interesting point is that decadent literature echoes such objections, for the decadents constructed an etiology of their own ailment far more comprehensive than Freud's erotocentric theory. In Erb's theory, which Freud quotes largely to lambast, one finds reference to many factors - irreligion, discontent, covetousness, social struggles, intolerable demands on the individual, the pursuit of highly-seasoned pleasures - which were clearly at play both in and behind decadent literature.

As a fine example of the decadents' pre-emptive strike on the Freudian project, consider the following diagnosis of the decadent disease. It is made by a character in George Egerton's²² story 'The Regeneration of Two', which appeared in her 1894 collection *Discords*. A unnamed male character is speaking to a female one named, uncannily enough, Fruen:

"Close your eyes, Fruen, and look down over all the cities of the world - look with your inner eyes, try to pierce to the soul of things; what do you see? Shall I tell you what *I* see? A great crowd of human beings. Take all these men, male and female, fashion them into one colossal man, study him, and what will you find in

subsequent displacement by sexuality, may be seen as an effort to reject the racial component in the concept of hereditary degeneracy he encountered in Paris under the tutelage of Charcot" [Stewart, 1976: 228].

Freud's etiology of hysteria has been criticised from the other angle too. Certain scholars, while not doubting that the diseases with which Freud was dealing were indeed mental ones, have traced their proliferation during the nineteenth century to factors other than sexual restraint. Decker [1991: 2] notes that "historically, hysteria has appeared prominently among groups - such as slaves, soldiers and servants - who feel they have little control over their lives." Thus there was a perfectly good sociological explanation of the particularly high rate of hysteria among Victorian women. Evans [1991: 9-11], examining the high incidence of hysteria among Frenchwomen of the time, identifies "far-reaching changes in the social and political order in France [which] made new demands on women of all classes", thus creating "stresses and pressures [which] may have cracked the fault-lines in women's mental health." "[T]he metamorphoses of hysteria throughout the years and from country to country," says Evans, "have provided one of the strongest cases for the influence of social conditions on neurotic disorders" [Evans, 1991: 155].

²²George Egerton was the pen-name of the Australian-born writer Mary Chavelita Dunne.

him? Tainted blood; a brain with the parasites of a thousand different systems sucking at its base and warping it; a heart robbed of all healthy feelings by false conceptions, bad conscience, and a futile code of morality - a code that makes the natural workings of sex a vile thing to be ashamed of; the healthy delight in the cultivation of one's body as the beautiful perfect sheath of one's soul and spirit, with no shame in any part of it, all alike being clean, a sin of the flesh, a carnal conception to be opposed by asceticism. A code that has thrown man out of balance and *made sexual love play far too prominent a part in life* - (it ought to be one note, not even a dominant note, in the chord of human love) - a code that demands the sacrifice of thousands of female victims as the price of its maintenance, that has filled the universe with an unclean conception of things, a prurient idea of purity - making man a great sick man." [Egerton, 1983: 189-190 - emphasis added]

This remarkable speech might more usefully have been addressed to Freud than to Fruen. For it offers some salient warnings to any would-be etiologist of *fin-de-siècle* neuroses. Sexual restraint, to be sure, does contribute to the sickness of decadent "man"; but it is *only one* of "a thousand different systems" warping the brain. Do *not*, the passage explicitly counsels, make the mistake of overvaluing the role of sexuality in human life. Yes, sex *appears* to Victorian eyes to be of overwhelming importance - but that is an illusion manufactured precisely by the prevailing conditions of excessive sexual restraint.

But by 1894 Freud had already embarked on a course which defied such subtle objections. The previous year he had written to Fliess: "It may be taken as a recognised fact that neurasthenia is a frequent consequence of an abnormal sexual life. The assertion, however, which I

wish to make and test by observations, is that neurasthenia can *only* be a sexual neurosis" [Webster, 1996: 187]. Sexual factors were uniquely responsible for hysteria, of course, as well as for neurasthenia;²³ and also for phenomena beyond the neuroses: dreams, works of art, failures of memory. The possibility raised by Egerton - that this stressing of sexuality was not so much a solution to the Victorian neuroses as a kind of Victorian neurosis in itself - has since been vigorously pursued by others, notably Jung:

Like Nietzsche, like the Great War, so too Freud ... is an answer to the sickness of the nineteenth century. That is certainly his chief significance.... [Psychoanalysis] preaches those things which are of paramount importance to the neurotic of the early twentieth century because he is one of the unconscious victims of late Victorian psychology. Psychoanalysis destroys the false values in the neurotic personality by cauterising away the rottenness of the dead nineteenth century.... But in so far as neurosis is not a disease specific to the Victorian era, but enjoys a general distribution in time and space, and is therefore present among peoples or individuals who are not in need of any special sexual enlightenment, nor open to any assumptions as to harmful sexual disturbances in their lives, a theory of neurosis or a theory of dreams based on a Victorian prejudice is at the most of very secondary import to science.... [Jung, 1983: 52-53]

²³"At the time Freud wrote," Richard Webster explains, "'neurasthenia' was often considered to be one of the two main neuroses, the other being 'hysteria'. Whereas the former was thought to be predominantly a male condition, the latter was usually, though not always, associated with women" [1995: 185].

Turning back to the passage from Egerton's story, we can extract from it another warning to Freud. Do not, the passage says, mistake the "great sick man", or woman, of the *fin de siècle*, for an accurate image of humankind in general - for these people are tainted and unnatural, their brains warped by a futile code of morality, by bad conscience, by an undue emphasis on sexuality. This warning goes right to the heart of psychoanalysis. For the warped people in question are the very specimens from whom Freud derived his conception of what was normal in human psychology.

In a limited and obvious sense Freud made no secret of the fact that his propositions about mental functioning proceeded from a study of unhealthy minds. For psychoanalysis, as everybody knows, originated as a method of diagnosing and treating neuroses. Its expansion into a general psychology was announced by two key works: *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), and *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901). "What constitutes the enormous importance of dream-interpretation, as well as of the latter study," as Freud explains in his *Autobiographical Study*,

is ... [that] previously psychoanalysis had only been concerned with solving pathological phenomena.... But when it came to dreams, it was no longer dealing with a pathological symptom, but with a phenomenon of normal mental life which might occur in any healthy person. If dreams turned out to be constructed like symptoms, if their explanations required the same assumptions - the repression of impulses, substitutive formation, compromise-formation, the dividing of the conscious and unconscious into various psychical systems - then psychoanalysis was no longer an auxiliary science in the field of psychopathology, it was rather the

starting-point of a new and deeper science of the mind which would be equally indispensable for the understanding of the normal. [SE, 20: 47]

This blurring, or removal, of the boundary between the sick and the well is formulated as a theoretical principle in both of these key works. In *Dreams*, Freud writes that “psychoanalytic research finds no fundamental, but only quantitative, distinctions between normal and neurotic life” [SE, 5: 373] And in the *Psychopathology*, he affirms that “the borderline between the normal and the abnormal in nervous matters is a fluid one ... we are all a little neurotic” [SE, 6: 278].

Freud offered the following explanation of the matter in 1910:

We no longer think that health and illness, normal and neurotic people, are to be sharply distinguished from each other, and that neurotic traits must necessarily be taken as proofs of a general inferiority. Today we know that neurotic symptoms are structures which are substitutes for certain achievements of repression that we have to carry out in the course of our development from a child to a civilized human being. We know too that we all produce such substitute structures, and that it is really only their number, intensity and distribution which justify us in using the practical concept of illness. [Freud, 1964: 81]

The “normal” person, then, suffers from the same mental structure as the neurotic: a mind consisting of two basic agencies in perpetual conflict, one full of impulses which seek gratification, the other with an express mission to beat these impulses down. The process which thus cleaves the mind, repression, is one which every “normal” person

suffers "in the course of our development from a child to a human being." A sick person differs from a well one only through certain fluctuations in the flow of energies through this system. There does, though, seem to be one crucial difference between the neurotic and the normal person in Freud's conception. Freud acknowledged - he could scarcely avoid acknowledging - that the object of his early studies, the neurotic, was a part of history - one victim in an explosion in neuroticism. To account for this explosion Freud conceded that his age was a particularly repressive one. ("Modern nervousness under our present social conditions is rapidly spreading.") But it does not seem to have greatly concerned Freud that the subjects, including pre-eminently himself, from whom he derived his notion of what was *normal* in human psychology (and his consequent belief that the normal did not differ greatly from the abnormal) lived in precisely the same era, endured precisely the same social conditions. Weren't these normal people also, like neurotics, an historical phenomenon? Why was the repression suffered by them to be considered a universal human problem, as distinct from a function of their harsh age?²⁴ Wasn't it possible that the phenomenon of repression was *in itself* peculiar to this era?

To put the question another way: how normal was the "normal" psyche of the time?²⁵ Normal enough to constitute the basis of a universal psychology? The decadents would have laughed at the suggestion. For the decadents, the contemporary psyche suffered from an

²⁴Because, Freud would have replied, the Oedipus complex is universal, and the two universally unacceptable instincts of which that complex consists would always have to be repressed. We will be examining that theory in the next chapter.

²⁵In *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud attacks religion's distortion of human psychology in a way which seems to have an ironic bearing on his own project: "Can an anthropologist give the cranial index of a people whose custom it is to deform their children's heads by bandaging them from their earliest years?... So long as man's earliest years are influenced by the religious thought-inhibition ... we cannot really say what he is actually like" [1949c: 83 - emphasis added]. The answer to Freud's hypothetical question is yes: an anthropologist can give the cranial index of such a people, but the index will represent as a norm something which is in fact a gross distortion.

ailment remarkably similar to Freudian repression, but with one key difference - they strenuously identified this as an historical disease. We have seen how Oscar Wilde did so in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In George Egerton's fruitful story, 'The Regeneration of Two', Fruen points out that a more marked version of the same repression has caused a worse distortion in the psyches of women:

We [women] have been taught to shrink from the honest expression of our wants and feelings as violations of modesty, or at least good taste. We are always battling with some bottom layer of real womanhood that we may not reveal; the primary impulses of our original destiny keep shooting out mimosa-like threads of natural feeling through the outside husk of our artificial selves, producing complex creatures.... One layer in us reverts instinctively to the time when we were just the child-bearing half of humanity and no more, waging war with the new layers that go to make up the fragile latter-day product with the disinclination to burden itself with motherhood.... [T]he desexualised half man, with a pride in the absence of sexual feeling, reckoning it as the sublimest virtue to have none, what is she but the outcome of centuries of patient repression? Repress and repress - how many generations has it gone on? You must expect some return for it....
[Egerton, 1983: 198-199]

A Freudian would probably think of this passage as a striking anticipation, and confirmation, of the master's insights. But it seems to me that Freud's theory of repression is imperilled, rather than validated, by the above speech. For here is a contemporary of Freud's complaining about the crushing effect of sexual repression - not repression as Freud

defined it, but repression conceived of as a social force that had attained an ugly pitch during the Victorian age. The effects of this kind of repression were profound - but not so profound that they could not be detected by the conscious mind, and reversed by means of social reform, of the kind that has slowly been achieved in the century since.²⁶

The second remarkable thing about the quoted passage is that Egerton reproaches this repression with having split the self into two parts: a repressed bottom layer consisting of "primal impulses" and "natural feeling"; and, restraining this secret inner being, indeed waging war with it, an "outside husk", an "artificial self". Although not always expressed with such uncanny proximity to the language of psychoanalysis, this notion of the split self is rife in the literature that leads up to Freud. "No mind can engender till divided into two," said Yeats [quoted by Gordon, 1979: 36]. The most obvious thematic manifestations of the divided self come in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in which Dorian learns of "the terrible pleasure of a double life" [134], and in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886),²⁷ but one also finds

²⁶Coinciding with this period of reform has been an extraordinary decline in the incidence of hysteria, to the point where, as Anthony Storr notes, "the type of case on which early psychoanalytic theory was originally based, namely, severe conversion hysteria in women, is seldom seen today" [quoted by Webster, 1995: 71]. See also Decker, 1991: 207.

²⁷Dr Jekyll, in his "Full Statement of the Case", admits that even before undertaking his chemical experiments he suffered from "a profound duplicity of life", induced by his "impatient gaiety of disposition, such as has made the happiness of many, but such as I found it hard to reconcile with my imperious desire to carry my head high, and wear a more than commonly grave countenance before the public. Hence it came about that I concealed my pleasures.... Though so profound a double-dealer, I was in no sense a hypocrite; both sides of me were in dead earnest; I was no more myself when I laid aside restraint and plunged in shame, than when I laboured, in the eye of day, at the furtherance of knowledge.... And it chanced that the direction of my scientific studies ... reacted and shed a strong light on this consciousness of the perennial war among my members. With every day, and from both sides of my intelligence, the moral and the intellectual, I thus drew steadily nearer to that truth by whose partial discovery I have been doomed to such a dreadful shipwreck: that man is not truly one, but truly two" [Stevenson, 1968: 83-84]. The experiments which unleash the monstrous Hyde begin, then, as an attempt to separate "the two natures that contended in the field of my consciousness": "If each, I told myself, could but be housed in separate identities, life would be relieved of all that was unbearable; the unjust might go his way, delivered from the aspirations and remorse of his more upright twin; and the just could walk steadfastly

subtler traces of it in the conceptions of thinkers who saw human existence in terms of two conflicting spirits, one anarchic, the other constrictive: Nietzsche with his notion of the Dionysian versus the Apollonian, Arnold with the Hellenic versus the Hebraic, Pater with the Classic versus the Romantic.

Such formulations, as we shall see, often seem to hover on the brink of the Freudian distinction between unbound mental processes and bound ones, the unconscious and the conscious. But Pater highlights a fundamental difference between his position and Freud's when he writes that the Romantic spirit, in contrast to the Classic, affords "*refuge from a tarnished actual present, a present of disillusion*" [Pater, 1948: 552 - emphasis added]. This confirms the impression we get from Wilde, and from Egerton, that by conceiving of the world, or the self, as the site of contending forces, the decadents meant to identify a lamentable contemporary disease, one which could, and should, be cured. The age was simply *too* Classic, *too* Hebraic, *too* Apollonian. It required one to present so rigidly proper an image to society ("anybody can act," as Wilde observed in a letter of 1892; "to be conventional is to be a comedian." [quoted by Ellmann, 1988: 349]) that effectively one had two selves: a public one and a private one.

By presenting this divided self as an historical product, the decadents lend weight to the allegation that Victorianism, as Jung put it, was "the matrix out of which Freud grew":

His revolutionary tendency to find always the negative explanation for things is based on the historical fact that the Victorian epoch has fraudulently used cultural values in such a

and securely on his upward path, doing the good things in which he found his pleasure, and no longer exposed to disgrace and penitence by the hands of this extraneous evil" [85].

way as to produce a middle-class idea of the world.... The same is true of his idea of man. Man's conscious qualities - all Victorian - his idealistic, counterfeited personality, rest on corresponding dark backgrounds, that is, repressed infantile sexuality.... This conception of man, considered historically, is a reaction to the tendency of the Victorian era to see everything in a 'rosy' light, and to describe everything sub rosa, for it was the time of mental 'pussyfooting', which finally brought to birth a Nietzsche who used a hammer in his philosophizing. [Jung, 1983: 50-51]

Dorian Gray is another who objects to psychological pussyfooting: he "used to wonder at the shallow psychology of those who conceive the Ego in man as a thing simple, permanent, reliable, and of one essence. To him, man was a being with myriad lives and myriad sensations, a complex multiform creature that bore within itself strange legacies of thought and passion ... " [1988: 112]. An appropriately complex psychology is delivered by the device of the portrait, which depicts a hideously mobile private self entirely removed from the false self Dorian displays to society. Dorian's duality reflects, it seems, a common condition - a self divided by too great an alienation from its animal core:

The worship of the senses has often, and with much justice, been decried, men feeling a natural instinct of terror about passions and sensations that seem stronger than themselves, and that they are conscious of sharing with the less highly organized forms of existence. But it appeared to Dorian Gray that the true nature of the senses had never been understood, and that they had remained savage and animal merely because the world had sought to starve them into submission or to kill them by pain. As he looked back

on man moving through History, he was haunted by a feeling of loss. So much had been surrendered! And to such little purpose! There had been mad wilful rejections, monstrous forms of self-torture and self-denial, whose origin was fear, and whose result was a degradation infinitely more terrible than that fancied degradation from which, in their ignorance, they had sought to escape. [1988: 104]

It is remarkable how close such passages in Wilde come to Nietzsche's account of the evolution of the "bad conscience". "I regard the bad conscience," Nietzsche wrote in the *Genealogy of Morals*, "as the serious illness that man was bound to contract under the stress of the most fundamental change he ever experienced - that change which occurred when he found himself finally enclosed within the walls of society and of peace." At that moment, says Nietzsche, "the old instincts of freedom ... all those instincts of wild, free, prowling man turned backward *against man himself*.... [T]hus began the gravest and uncanniest illness, from which humanity has not yet recovered, man's suffering of *man, of himself* - the result of a forcible sundering from his animal past ... a declaration of war against the old instincts upon which his strength, joy, and terribleness had rested hitherto" [Nietzsche, 1989: 84-87, *passim* - italics in the original].

So Nietzsche, like the decadents, and unlike Freud, regarded the split self as an illness, one from which it was possible to recover by giving instincts their day in the sun. Just as Wilde's Lord Henry maintains that "Every impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the mind, and poisons us" [Wilde, 1988: 29], so Nietzsche affirms that "All instincts that do not discharge themselves outwardly *turn inward* - this is what I call the *internalization* of man." This denial of instinct produces an inner

agency of the mind: "The entire inner world, originally as thin as if it were stretched between two membranes, expanded and extended itself, acquired depth, breadth and height, in the same measure as outward discharge was *inhibited*" [Nietzsche, 1989: 84].

In one sense this is precisely what Freud would say. But Nietzsche considered this split self a temporary disease, and unashamedly recommended the *re-externalisation of man* as its cure. "The bad conscience is an illness, there is no doubt about that, but an illness as pregnancy is an illness" [88]. In this respect he differed fundamentally from the essentialist and apolitical Freud. The decadent position, as we shall see, falls somewhere in between. They did not speak of the split self in a tone of scientific aloofness - far from it. Still, it must be said that their ideas about what exactly was to be done with the inner self had little of the robust activism that we find in Nietzsche.

But if we stick for the moment to their notions about the *nature* of this inner self, we will continue to find talk which, while it seldom has the precise linguistic overtones of Freud that we find in Nietzsche, with his talk of latency and repression,²⁸ is nonetheless eerily Freudian. Transferring their preference for mobility over stasis to the battlefield of the self, the decadents conceived a kind of dynamic psychology before Freud. They revelled in all that interior energy - forces, senses, *instincts* - which the age wanted them to neglect. Pater stressed in his 'Conclusion' that there could be no divorcing the self from the physical world around it, from all those "forces parting sooner or later on their ways". "That clear perpetual outline of face and limb is but an image of ours under

²⁸"This *instinct for freedom* forcibly made latent ... this instinct for freedom pushed back and repressed, incarcerated within ..." [Nietzsche, 1989: 87 - italics in original].

which we group them - a design in a web, the actual threads of which pass out beyond it" [1973: 39]. And when we move from the physical self to "the inward world of thought and feeling, the whirlpool is still more rapid, the flame more eager and devouring" [1973: 39]. The modern self was the site of a struggle similar to the one that Pater saw in the history of Greek art: the "struggle ... between the palpable and limited human form, and the floating essence it is to contain" [Pater, 1922b: 34].

Language too had to grapple with this anarchic internal essence. This is the theme of the famous letter of 1871 in which Rimbaud speaks of the poet's duty to "make himself a seer". Poetry, says Rimbaud, must begin as Freudian psychology would soon begin: through a course of deep self-analysis. "The first study of a man who wants to be a poet is the knowledge of himself, complete ... he becomes the great patient, the great criminal, the great accursed - and the great learned one! - among men - For he arrives at the unknown!" [Rimbaud, 1986: 11]. There is a place, according to Rimbaud, deep in the poet's soul, a murky region "*down there*" - the italics are his - which it was the job of poetic language to contain: "If what [the poet] brings back from *down there* has form, he brings forth form; if it is formless, he brings forth formlessness. A language has to be found ... " [Rimbaud, 1986: 12].²⁹ One wonders whether Rimbaud was reflecting the conditions *down there* when he wrote, in 'Solde', of "Wild and infinite impulse [*Elan insense et infini*] towards invisible splendours, intangible delights ... " [Rimbaud, 1986: 296].

Mallarmé, too, spoke of the Symbolist project as an attempt to come to grips, in language, with something profoundly akin to the

²⁹Yeats's experiments with automatic writing were another manifestation of this urge to get the inner self straight down on paper. An example of a similar procedure in a different medium is given by Arthur Symonds: "a young American sculptor ... said to me on seeing for the first time a picture of Whistler's, 'Whistler seems to think his picture upon canvas - and there it is!'" [1974a: 73].

Freudian unconscious. In his 1896 essay 'Crisis in Verse', Mallarmé portrayed Symbolism as a backlash against the kind of excessive formalism represented by the late Victor Hugo, who had "incarnated verse itself ... [like] a monument in a silent desert.... Poetry waited respectfully ... for the giant - who identified it with his increasingly firm and tenacious blacksmith's hand - to disappear; and then it broke loose" [Mallarmé, 1980: 2]. The resulting verse, composed as a Dionysiac revolt against oppressive Apollonian norms, had qualities which could hardly, it seemed, be appreciated by the conscious mind. "The novelty of free verse in our day," explains Mallarmé, " ... derives entirely from what should be called its 'polymorphic' nature; now we are witnessing all degrees of disintegration of the official line of verse.... For example, M. Moreas's recent verse - fragmented, with a delightful and ingenious precision, *whose euphony the reader instinctively agrees to perceive ...*" [Mallarmé, 1980: 4 - emphasis added]. "Prosody's origins," Mallarmé claims later in the same piece, "lie in pre-conscious times" [6]. A more homely version of the same project was pursued in English by the Rhymers' Club, whose goal, according to Yeats, was "to rediscover in verse the syntax of impulsive common life" [Yeats, 1955: 304].

Literature was gradually beginning to throw light on that murky mental place "down there". Wilde recognised this in 'The Critic as Artist', in which Gilbert says:

People sometimes say that fiction is getting too morbid. As far as psychology is concerned, it has never been morbid enough. We have merely touched the surface of the soul, that is all. In one single ivory cell of the brain there are stored away things more marvellous and more terrible than even they have dreamed of

who, like the author of *Le Rouge et le Noir*, have sought to track the soul to its most secret places. [Wilde, 1970a: 181]

This mysterious “cell” in the brain crops up again in the researches of Dorian Gray:

for a season he inclined to the materialistic doctrines of the *Darwinismus* movement in Germany, and found a curious pleasure in tracing the thoughts and passions of men to some pearly cell in the brain, or some white nerve in the body, delighting in the conception of the absolute dependence of the spirit on certain physical conditions, morbid or healthy, normal or diseased. [Wilde, 1988: 106]

The mention of Darwin is timely, for we cannot ignore his considerable role in all this pre-Freudian exploration of an instinctive self inaccessible to the conscious mind. To quote Ronald Fletcher, from his book *Instinct in Man*: “The study of instinct can be traced far back into the history of thought ... but we are justified in regarding the work of Darwin as the most important turning-point in the history of the subject.... [I]t cannot be too often emphasized that all the subsequent accounts of instinct were undertaken with [his] evolutionary hypothesis in mind” [Fletcher, 1968: 29-30].

This did not apply just to biologists: anybody who wanted to know how the mind functioned had to take Darwin on board. The young Wilde, writing in his *College Notebooks* in the late 1870s, noted that: “Comparative anatomy shows us that, physically, man is but the last term of a long series which leads from the highest mammal to the almost formless speck of living protoplasm which lies on the shallow boundary

between animal and vegetable life: so does comparative psychology or the anatomy of the mind" [Smith & Hefland, 1989: 163].

To see how thoroughly such materialism infected decadent thinking about the composition of the individual, it is instructive to consider the purity of a pre-Darwinian account of a dualised self. Victor Hugo, as one commentator points out, "in his famous 'Preface to *Cromwell*' (1827) ... advocated a drama whose action was impelled by conflicts caused by the struggle of dualistic forces within the individual, who was described as 'double ... composed of two beings, one perishable, the other immortal, one carnal, the other ethereal, one enchained by the appetites, the other borne on the wings of enthusiasm and dreams'" [Williams, 1985: 246].

A little over sixty years later, when Wilde wrote *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, literature had not lost its urge to posit, as a companion to the mundane everyday self, an invisible self borne on the wings of dreams. On the contrary, this urge had grown even stronger. But it had become very difficult to call this inner self a "soul", or to speak in an unembarrassed way of its ethereality, of its immortality. The whole picture had become irrevocably complicated, as Dorian sees:

Soul and body, body and soul - how mysterious they were! There was animalism in the soul, and the body had its moments of spirituality. The senses could refine, and the intellect could degrade. Who could say where the fleshly impulse ceased, or the psychical impulse began? How shallow were the arbitrary definitions of ordinary psychologists! And yet how difficult to choose between the claims of the various schools! Was the soul a shadow seated in the house of sin? Or was the body really in the soul, as Giordano Bruno thought? The separation of spirit from

matter was a mystery, and the union of spirit with matter was a mystery also. [Wilde, 1988: 56]

An interesting essay could be written on the deployment through Wilde's works of this word "soul." As the passage above makes clear, the word had been rendered radically unstable; it was no longer possible to invoke with a straight face that traditional form of dualism, soul versus body. One had to speak instead of a duality within the mind - of mental impulses versus bodily ones, of animalism, of *psychology*. Indeed it was only at that fatal moment when we internalised all our instincts, said Nietzsche, that "man first developed what was later called his soul" [Nietzsche, 1989: 84].

On the question of what to do with this new soul, the decadents, as I have already noted, had a response far less rough-and-ready than Nietzsche's. The Nietzschean solution - to liberate one's instincts, to convert them into objective movement - would require a suspension of that hostility to all things external that characterised the decadent sensibility. For "action" as Wilde had Gilbert declare in 'The Critic as Artist', was "a blind thing dependent on external influences and *moved by an impulse of whose nature it is unconscious....* Its basis is the lack of imagination. It is the last resource of those who do not know how to dream" [1970a: 124 - emphasis added]. "Action! What is action?" Gilbert goes on. "It dies at the moment of its energy. It is a base concession to fact" [128]. Similarly, Rimbaud, in 'Hunger', wrote: "Action is not life, but a way of *wasting some force, an enervation*" [1986: 334 - emphasis added]. And Arthur Symonds wrote of "the infinite insignificance of action, its immense distance from the *current of life*" [1974d: 85 - emphasis added].

The true current of life was internal. Only when rigorously confined to that domain could instinctual energy remain pure. "I don't want to be at the mercy of my emotions," says Dorian Gray. "I want to use them, to enjoy them, and to dominate them" [Wilde, 1988: 89]. Freud said that "a universal and indispensable attribute of all instincts [is] their capacity for initiating movement" [Freud, 1990a: 297]. As far as the decadent was concerned, this *capacity* alone was what mattered. So what if instincts had the potential to cause mere objective movement? The truly interesting thing was that they constituted actual movement in the inner world. When Pater wonders aloud in his 'Conclusion' how we can "pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy?" he is not speaking of physical callisthenics, but mental ones - a "quickened, multiplied consciousness" [Pater, 1973: 40, 41].

Even when the decadents did deal with the conversion of instinct into activity, their treatment remained curiously solipsistic, as in the following excerpt from Arthur Symonds's frenetic essay on 'The World as Ballet'.

The dance is life, animal life, having its own way passionately. Part of that natural madness which men were once wise enough to include in religion, it began with the worship of the disturbing deities, the gods of ecstasy for whom wantonness, and wine, and all things in which energy passes into an ideal excess, were sacred.... From the first it has mimed the instincts.... A waltz, in a drawing-room, takes us suddenly out of all convention, away from those guardians of our order who sit around the walls, approvingly, unconsciously; in its winding motion it raises an invisible wall around us, shutting us off from the whole world, in

with ourselves ... all this really primitive feeling, all this acceptance of the instincts it idealises ... is precisely what gives dancing its pre-eminence among the more than imitative arts.
[1974c: 81-82]

The objective agitation of a dance is somehow subordinate to the subjective agitation of instinct. Compared with the instincts, the dance is merely an *imitation*, a *mime*, an *idealisation*: a pale simulacrum of the dance of the mind. Instincts are not a path outward to action; action is a path inward to them.³⁰ Hence the strange notion that a dance "raises an invisible wall around us, shutting us off from the whole world, in with ourselves."

A similar journey inward is traced by Des Esseintes, who early in Huysmans's novel tries to spend his energies vigorously by keeping

³⁰Such notions persist, and produce more ample fruit, as Modernism evolves out of the Decadence. They might be said to culminate in that masterpiece of interiority, *A la recherche du temps perdu*. In *Swann's Way*, Proust writes: "[E]ven if we have the sensation of being always enveloped in, surrounded by our own soul, still it does not seem a fixed and immovable prison; rather do we seem to be borne away with it, and perpetually struggling to transcend it, to break out into the world, with a perpetual discouragement as we hear endlessly all around us that unvarying sound which is not an echo from without, but the resonance of a vibration from within. We try to discover in things, which become precious to us on that account, the reflection of what our soul has projected onto them; we are disillusioned when we find that they are in reality devoid of the charm which they owed, in our minds, to the association of certain ideas; sometimes we mobilise all our spiritual forces in a glittering array in order to bring our influence to bear on other human beings who, we very well know, are situated outside ourselves where we can never reach them. And so, if I always imagined the woman I loved in the setting I most longed at the time to visit, if I wished that it were she who showed it to me, who opened to me the gates of an unknown world, it was not by the mere hazard of a simple association of thoughts; no, it was because my dreams of travel and of love were only moments - which I isolate artificially today as though I were cutting sections at different heights in a jet of water, iridescent but seemingly without flow or motion - in a single, undeviating, irresistible outpouring of all the forces of my life" [Proust, 1987: 93-94]. Later in the same volume: "the countries which we long for occupy, at any given moment, a far larger place in our actual life than the country in which we happen to be. Doubtless, if, at that time, I had paid more attention to what was in my mind when I pronounced the words 'going to Florence, to Parma, to Pisa, to Venice,' I should have realised that what I saw was in no sense a town.... These images, unreal, fixed, always alike, filling all my nights and days, differentiated this period in my life from those which had gone before it (and might easily have been confused with it *by an observer who saw things only from without, that is to say who saw nothing*)..." [423-424 - emphasis added].

company with a group of "gay young men [who] were mad on races and operettas, lansqueunet and baccarat, and squandered fortunes on horses, cards, and all the other pleasures dear to empty minds." But all this activity provokes none of those inner stirrings which really count. "After a year's trial, Des Esseintes was overcome by an immense distaste for the company of these men, whose debauchery struck him as being base and facile, entered into without discrimination or desire, indeed *without any real stirring of the blood or stimulation of the nerves*" [Huysmans, 1987: 21 - emphasis added]. Des Esseintes accordingly embarks on the pursuit of rarefied subjective pleasures. He savours perfumes, inhales the gamy odour of dead or dying literatures, relishes the "internal symphonies" provided by his "mouth-organ" (a drinking apparatus which dispenses manifold liqueurs [58]), and generally puts into practice, or non-practice, the infamous decadent maxim of Villiers de l'isle Adam: "As for living, our servants can do that for us." He travels to Holland, but his expectations - fuelled by the Dutch paintings in the Louvre - are not met, for the art "had in fact served as a spring-board from which he had soared into a dream-world of false trails and impossible ambitions, for nowhere in this world had he found the fairyland of which he had dreamt..." [141]. Des Esseintes plans a subsequent journey to England, but aborts it at the train station. "After all," he reflects, "what was the good of moving, when a fellow could travel so magnificently sitting in a chair?" [Huysmans, 1987: 142].

When imaginings are so stubbornly withheld from the real world, when instincts are so strictly denied passage beyond the border of the self, then we do indeed seem to be dealing with a kind of disease. Reading these works, as a jaded Edmund Wilson remarked toward the end of *Axel's Castle*, "we are oppressed by a sullenness, a lethargy, a sense of *energies ingrown* and sometimes festering" [Wilson, 1947: 283 - emphasis

added]. But our feeling that the decadent perspective was "sick" - a feeling which, incidentally, the decadents shared - implies that there exists, somewhere, a perspective which we can confidently define as healthy. Our belief that Wilde was *wrong* when he claimed that two and two made five entails a belief in the existence, beyond the self, of certain eternal rules by which he can be proved wrong. We might expect to be able to turn for this perspective, for these rules, to science - particularly, one might think, to a science which presented itself as a cure for mental aberrations.

But in the science of psychoanalysis we do not even find norms which confirm the abnormality of the decadent condition, much less any prospect of its cure. Normal psychology, as Freud defined it, was frighteningly close to decadent psychology. As we shall see, Freud would have been able to offer no solace to the suffering decadents, except to congratulate them on the accuracy of their analysis of the human condition.

Freud's theory of instincts is a case in point. Volosinov, in his *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique*, remarks:

Certain partisans of Freud claim, having primarily his 'theory of instincts' in mind, that psychoanalysis has its objective basis in biology. This claim is completely groundless. One can with greater right speak of Freud's psychologization and subjectivization of biology. Freud dissolves all objective biological forms and organismic processes in the subjective-psychical. All those biological terms, with which the pages of psychoanalytic books

teem, lose their objective rigour, so thoroughly dissolved are they in the subjective-psychological context. [Volosinov, 1976: 72-73]

"Subjectivization of biology" would be an accurate way of describing the decadent attitude ^{to} instincts that we have just been discussing. To understand why Volosinov thought that psychoanalysis perpetrated something similar, we must consider passages of Freud like the following one:

a stimulus of instinctual origin does not arise in the outside world but from within the organism itself.... An instinct ... never acts as a momentary impact but always as a constant force. As it makes its attack not from without but from within the organism, it follows that no flight can avail against it. A better term for a stimulus of instinctual origin is a 'need'; that which does away with this need is 'satisfaction'. This can be attained only by a suitable (adequate) alteration of the inner source of stimulation. [Freud, 1950a: 62]

Instincts might well be an objective force, but Freud's account of motivation begins and ends in what Pater called "the narrow chamber of the individual mind". Movement in the outer world is for Freud precisely what Symonds deemed it in his essay on dance: a kind of echo of the real movement that occurs with the readjustment of inner quantities. From the *Introductory Lectures*: "The final aim of mental activity, which can be *qualitatively* described as a striving towards pleasure and avoidance of pain, is represented *economically* in the task of mastering quantities of excitation (stimulus-masses) present in the mental apparatus, and in preventing the accumulation of them which gives rise to pain" [1940: 313].

It will be objected that Freud, being a psychologist, was *bound* to focus his attention on the processes of the individual mind, and can scarcely be branded a decadent individualist on that account. That is obviously true. But it is also true that Freud granted those processes a certain primacy over the world beyond them. At the beginning of life, says Freud, the world outside our self is to all intents and purposes non-existent. "The contrast between what is subjective and objective does not exist from the first" [1950k: 184]. The primal condition of the mental apparatus, the state enjoyed by the young infant, is one during which, "whatever was thought of (desired) was simply imagined in an hallucinatory form, as still happens today with our dream-thoughts every night" [Freud, 1950a: 14]. Each one of us begins life as a kind of miniature Des Esseintes. What was the good of moving, when one could travel so magnificently without leaving one's cot?

But this ideal state of affairs, this unadulterated reign of the pleasure principle, must come to an end. Reality must eventually be recognised. But that recognition, Freud stresses, is still governed by the same primal motive, the quest for pleasure.³¹ "This attempt at satisfaction by means of hallucination was abandoned only in consequence of the absence of the expected gratification, because of the disappointment experienced. Instead, the mental apparatus had to form a conception of the real circumstances in the outer world and to exert itself to alter them" [1950a: 14]. For the mind as Freud saw it, then, external reality was secondary to subjective reality in two crucial ways: chronologically - for the mind's apprehension of the outer world occurs only after a significant period of that utter inwardness which is the

³¹A thesis which, argues Volosinov, perpetuates the priority of "the inner, subjective point of view; all external reality is for [Freud], in the final analysis, merely the 'reality principle,' a principle that he places *on the same level* with the 'pleasure principle'" [1976: 72 - emphasis in original].

mind's original condition - and also, so to speak, qualitatively, for reality is a tardy and unreliable supplier of the gratification which hallucination had always delivered rain, hail or shine. This deficiency of the real obliges the mind to keep "one mode of thought-activity ... split off ... kept free from reality testing and ... subordinated to the pleasure principle alone" - namely, "the act of *phantasy-making*, which begins already in the games of children, and later, continued as *daydreaming*, abandons its dependence on real objects" [1950a: 16-17]. Thus we retain, in the faculty of imagination, a portion of the mental paradise we once possessed and will always want back - "Just as a nation whose wealth rests on the exploitation of its land yet reserves certain territory to be preserved in its original state and protected from cultural alterations, e.g. Yellowstone Park" [17n.].

The decadents sought, somewhere beneath the husk of their false public identities, an authentic inner self - an internal Yellowstone Park, one might say. Freud claimed to have found it. Nor was this park as small and circumscribed as Freud implies when he identifies it with "the act of phantasy-making". For something very similar to the park function is served by the whole agency of the unconscious, where, with an "entire disregard of the reality-test ... thought-reality is placed on an equality with external actuality, wishes with fulfilment and occurrence, just as happens without more ado under the supremacy of the old pleasure-principle" [1950a: 20].

The unconscious escorts wishes to their fulfilment in all sorts of ingenious ways - not just through daydreams, but also through nocturnal ones, as well as through the engineering of appropriate neurotic symptoms, covertly satisfactory slips of the tongue, agreeably wicked jokes, screen memories, cathartic works of art, and so on. One would generally think of such techniques of pleasure-getting as synthetic, or

artificial, because they bypass reality. But since they reproduce, or more accurately perpetuate, modes of mental functioning that prevailed when reality was not around to be bypassed, artificial is the wrong word for them. They are primal modes of gratification; they are no more artificial than Yellowstone Park, or at any rate than the environment that we find inside Yellowstone Park.

The decadents' fetishisation of artificial and synthetic modes of gratification, their shunning of action because of its "immense distance from the current of life", their pursuit of a cocooned existence devoted to solitary pleasures - these things appear to us, and indeed appeared to the decadents themselves, perverse, pathological. But here we find such things being theoretically elaborated, and in the process normalised, as part of Freud's general psychology. Satisfaction by hallucination, Freud decreed, was no mere substitute for 'real' satisfaction; on the contrary, so-called objective satisfaction was in fact a substitute for fantasy, and a poor one at that, so poor that a more or less constant fund of unmet desires accumulate, which the unconscious is obliged to go on gratifying by the old failsafe methods.

It is irrelevant here, I think, that Freud the man professed a healthy, and wholly undecadent, respect for the texture of reality. What matters is that the model of mind that Freud proposed - a model from one would not expect Freud's own mental functioning to have been exempt - suggests, as the decadents did, that the world of inner desire is so real that the outer world pales by comparison:

Let us imagine ourselves in the position of an almost entirely helpless living organism, as yet unorientated in the world and with stimuli impinging on its nervous tissue. This organism will soon become capable of making a first discrimination and a first

orientation. On the one hand, it will detect certain stimuli which can be avoided by an action of the muscles (flight) - these it ascribes to the outside world; on the other hand, it will also be aware of stimuli against which such action is of no avail and whose urgency is in no way diminished by it - these stimuli are the tokens of an inner world, the proof of instinctual needs. The apperceptive substance of the living organism will thus have found in the efficacy of the muscular activity a means for discriminating between 'outer' and 'inner'. [1950a: 62]

Our first discrimination, our first orientation, involves the understanding that the self cannot be overcome, whereas the world beyond it *can* be. The common sense assumption, the assumption against which the decadents defined themselves as perverse, is that the opposite is true: it is the outer world which is intractable. By inverting this assumption, Freud implied a radical new ethics, as Ernest Gellner points out: "Psychoanalysis ... put forward a new and highly appealing version of Stoicism.... Where the old Mark One Stoicism preached acceptance of external reality by means of bending inner reality, Freudianism (relatively indifferent to external reality) preaches acceptance of inner reality ... " [1993: 86].

"What a man really has, is what is in him," said Wilde in 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism'. "What is outside of him should be a matter of no importance" [1970c: 235]. *Should be* a matter of no importance: not even Wilde dared to claim that it genuinely *was* a matter of no importance. But Freud proposed the existence of an unconscious mind which operates in full accordance with Wilde's individualist ideal. Similarly, the model of mental functioning put forward in that key decadent text, Pater's 'Conclusion' to *The Renaissance*, is so outlandish

that Pater would no doubt have been surprised to hear a scientist endorse it. But in a sense Freud did. We have already quoted Pater's words, but it is worth quoting them again in light of their strong correspondence to the Freudian account of perception that we have just examined.

At first sight experience seems to bury us under a flood of external objects, pressing upon us with a sharp importunate reality, calling us out of ourselves in a thousand forms of action. But when reflection begins to act upon those objects they are dissipated under its influence; ... each object is loosed into a group of impressions ... in the mind of the observer. And if we continue to dwell on this world ... of impressions ... it contracts still further; the whole scope of observation is dwarfed to the narrow chamber of the individual mind. Experience, already reduced to a swarm of impressions, is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without. Every one of those impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world. [Pater, 1973: 39-40 - emphasis added]

Freud himself inadvertently confirms the Paterian quality of his own theories when, in 1910, he quotes Pater in support of a psychoanalytic interpretation. The citation comes during *Leonardo Da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood*,³² while Freud is speculating on the mystery of the Mona Lisa's smile.

³²A study which Peter Gay calls a "severely flawed performance" [Gay, 1988: 270]. For details on the nature of the flaws, see Gay, 270-274 and the chapter entitled 'The Lessons of Leonardo' in Stannard, 1980.

The need for a deeper reason behind the attraction of La Gioconda's smile, which so moved the artist that he was never again free from it, has been felt by more than one of his biographers. Walter Pater, who sees in the picture of Mona Lisa a 'presence expressive of what in the ways of a thousand years men had come to desire', and who writes very sensitively of 'the unfathomable smile, always with a touch of something sinister in it which plays over all Leonardo's work', leads us to another clue when he declares: 'Besides, the picture is a portrait. From childhood we see the image defining itself on the fabric of his dreams; and but for express historical testimony, we might fancy that this was but his ideal lady, embodied and beheld at last.' Let us attempt to clarify what is suggested here. It may very well have been that Leonardo was fascinated by M. Lisa's smile for the reason that it awoke something in him which had for long lain dormant in his mind - probably an old memory.... Pater's confident assertion that we can see, from childhood, a face like Mona Lisa's defining itself on the fabric of his dreams, seems convincing and deserves to be taken literally. [Freud, 1964: 60 - 61]

W. B. Yeats, we will remember, chopped Pater's impressions about the Mona Lisa into lines and placed them in the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*. To Freud, on the other hand, Pater's cadenced observations have a more profound value. They "deserve to be taken literally" because they agree with what Freud ventures as a scientific truth - that the picture is expressive of Leonardo's Oedipus complex, that "the smile of Mona Lisa

Giacondo had awakened in [Leonardo] as a grown man the memory of the mother of his earliest childhood" [Freud, 1964: 64].³³

This is one of the few occasions in the *Standard Edition* when Freud comes into direct contact with a piece of decadent writing, and it is surely significant that he vigorously endorses its propositions. Yet if Freud wants to establish that he is engaging in responsible scientific theory, rather than wild, counterfactual speculation, then Pater's criticism is the wrong authority to cite. In the 'Preface' to the *Renaissance*, Pater quotes Arnold's dictum that "the aim of criticism is to see the object in itself as it really is", and goes on to explain that his own critical credo involves a significant shift in focus: "the first step towards seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly" [see Ellmann, 1988: 308 and Ellmann, 1973: 62-63]. Wilde, in 'The Critic as Artist' offered a more frank indication of the distance between Arnold's critical theory and that of the impressionistic critic: "the primary aim of the critic," Wilde says, "is to see the object as in itself it really is not" [1970a: 137]. In other words, the critic's "sole aim is to chronicle his own impressions" [133].³⁴ As ammunition for this audacious theory that criticism must be purely autobiographical, "treat[ing] the work of art simply as a starting-point for a new creation," a creation which will be "the record of one's own soul ... more fascinating than history, as it is concerned simply with oneself", Wilde cites nothing other than Pater's meditation on the Mona Lisa's smile:

³³At some point between the ages of three and five Leonardo became separated from his biological mother.

³⁴As Wilde said elsewhere, "in aesthetic criticism attitude is everything. For in art there is no such thing as a universal truth. A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true" [Wilde, 1970d: 32].

Who ... cares whether Mr Pater has put into the portrait of the Mona Lisa something that Leonardo never dreamed of? The painter may have been merely the slave of an archaic smile, as some have fancied, but whenever I pass into the cool galleries of the Palace of the Louvre, and stand before that strange figure ... I say to my friend, 'The presence that thus so strangely rose beside the waters is expressive of what in the ways of a thousand years man had come to desire'....

And so the picture becomes more wonderful to us than it really is, and reveals to us a secret of which, in truth, it knows nothing.... [Wilde, 1970a: 134-135]

Freud is right to think of Pater's assertions as "confident", but wrong to take that confidence as a sign of their objective veracity. For what they are confident assertions *of* is Pater's subjective impressions. It is not logically impossible, of course, that Pater stumbled on the true secret of the painting (assuming for a moment that there is one) during all that impressionistic waffle about dreams and desires. But in light of his carefree allusion to certain "express historical testimony" which disproves his key speculation, this seems unlikely. Pater is free to ignore such testimony, because his curious epistemology has it that the existence of any reality beyond the self can only be *conjectured*. But Freud, who wanted to be thought a scientist, probably should have been worried by that phrase "but for express historical testimony", and perhaps should even have tried to establish what that testimony was.

Or perhaps not. The distinction between dreams and historical testimony is rendered problematic by psychoanalysis. While Freud would never have denied that there is such a thing as a truth which exists independently of what Pater wants to be true, and of what Freud

wants to be true, and of what we ourselves want to be true, he nonetheless raises the large conundrum of which one of us ought to be trusted to find it. "The ego," Freud says, meaning ego in the traditional sense of the self,³⁵ "is always the standard by which one measures the external world; one learns to understand it by means of a constant comparison with oneself" [1990a: 266].³⁶ The idea that the self is the only lens through which we can see the world is already a decadent-sounding model of perception, less close to Arnold's ideal of knowing the thing in itself than it is to Pater's project of knowing one's impression of the thing. But the Freudian self is driven by desire, so in its capacity as a lens it can hardly be said to be free of flaws. To put it another way, reality is recognised only by our conscious mind, which is a somewhat ramshackle structure built on the still-active volcano of the unconscious - where "there is no 'indication of reality' ... so that it is impossible to distinguish between truth and emotionally-charged fiction" [Freud, A. et al., 1954: 216]. While the unconscious continues to assert its emotionally-charged fictions, we have the consequence that "[o]nly for the rarest and best adjusted mind does it seem possible to preserve the picture of external reality, as it is perceived, against the distortion to which it is normally subjected in its passage through the psychical individuality of the percipient" [1966: 229]. Ultimately, then, Freud takes us beyond Pater, and

³⁵Freud is writing in 1909 here - before, that is, he developed his 'second topography', in which ego became a technical term designating the conscious part of the mind. On the two ways in which Freud employed the word 'ego', see the 'Editor's Introduction' to *The Ego and the Id* in the *Standard Edition* [9: 7-8].

³⁶"There ... runs through my thoughts," as Freud confessed in the *Psychopathology*, "a continuous current of 'personal reference' It is as if I were obliged to compare everything I hear about other people with myself; as if my personal complexes were put on alert whenever another person is brought to my notice. This cannot possibly be an individual peculiarity of my own: it must rather contain an indication of the way in which we understand 'something other than ourself' in general. I have reasons for supposing that other people are in this respect very similar to me" [Freud, 1966: 24]. One person who did not feel the same way was Einstein, who once commented, "I feel such a sense of solidarity with all living things that it does not matter to me where the individual begins and ends" [Born, 1971: 152]. This kind of outlook seems to be a far more sound basis for scientific observation than Freud's, which might more appropriately be called an "inlook".

all the way to Wilde's total inversion of Arnold's ideal: we tend to know the thing as in itself it really is not.

It is not the purpose of this thesis to ask how somebody who proposed this model of perception could also have claimed to be, as a scientist, in possession of a crystal-clear picture of external reality. We are concerned here with the close relation between the Freudian model and such apparently outrageous decadent utterances as Remy de Gourmont's claim, in his 1895 book *L'Idéalisme*, that "Man knows nothing other than his own intelligence, his self, the only reality, the special and unique world that I contain, carry within me, distort, dissipate, and recreate according to my own personal activity; nothing moves or has its being outside the knowing subject; everything I think is real: the only reality is thought" [quoted by Pierrot, 1981: 72].

Max Nordau defined "Ego-mania" as one of the principal disorders that shaped "degenerate" literature. "The ego-maniac," he said, "... is an invalid who does not see things as they are, does not understand the world, and cannot take up a right attitude to it" [Nordau, 1968: 243]. Consider the above assertion of Gourmont's, and imagine for a moment that he is not writing even partially for effect, but means every word he says. Can we really condemn Nordau for thinking that there is something sick about such a perspective? Even if we stop short of calling Gourmont an invalid, surely we cannot avoid the judgement that his attitude is an unhealthy one, if only in the sense that he would run a substantial risk, when stepping out into the world in which he did not believe, of being run over by a hansom cab.

But in arriving at that judgement, we would seem to have made one fundamental mistake: that of believing that Gourmont really thought these things. Surely we have taken him too literally, mistaking an aesthetic stance for a serious stab at an epistemology. As Bernard

Shaw points out, such a misunderstanding of the nature of literary expression seems to inform Nordau's belief that the decadents were insane: "People do not write [meaningless rhymes] for the sake of conveying information, but for the sake of amusing and pleasing, just as people do not eat strawberries and cream to nourish their bones and muscles, but to enjoy the taste of a toothsome dish" [Shaw, 1911: 75].

Freud's apparent endorsement of the decadent perspective, though, adds an interesting twist to this debate. George L. Mosse, introducing the 1968 edition of *Degeneration*, suggests that Nordau had been wrong to proclaim the decadents insane - because Freud had proved their insanity right.

His *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) not only marked the end of the psychology in which Nordau had believed but also *served to underwrite the Expressionist view of truth*. Two years later August Strindberg, in the preface to his *Dream Play*, put the case squarely. 'The laws of space and time have been abolished, reality contributes only a slight foundation upon which phantasy works and weaves new patterns ... but one consciousness stands above all else: that of the dreamer. For there exist no secrets, no illogicalities, no scruples, no laws.' The certainty of Nordau's world had vanished. [Mosse, 1968: xxx - emphasis added]

Mosse, evidently, takes the objective correctness of Freud's ideas for granted, and seems to believe that they confer scientific cachet on the strikingly similar ideas of the decadents - including, presumably, the egregious notion that the laws of time and space have been *abolished*. But before we dispense with the laws of space and time, we might want to re-examine the credentials of Freud's theories. Can't his proximity to the

decadents be looked at the other way? Couldn't we just as easily say that *they* underwrite *him* - and then proceed to reassess *his* credit rating in that light?

Strindberg's is an extreme solipsism indeed, but there are certain respects in which Freud surpassed it. For Strindberg, "one consciousness stands above all else: that of the dreamer." Freud derived from the case of the dreamer a more profound proposition: that one *unconscious* stands above all else. Freud's dreamer is capable of making things conform to wishes in ways that he or she cannot consciously conceive of. Just as Freud expanded the definition of sex until the original concept could scarcely be recognised, so he radically widened the jurisdiction of the dream: jokes, artworks, failures of memory, and neurotic symptoms all became analogous to dreams, in the sense that they all became arenas for the fulfilment of wishes. Freud took a huge range of ostensibly objective phenomena and turned them in an important sense into subjective ones, putty in the hands of private desire.

The Interpretation of Dreams was the work in which Freud unveiled his notion that wishes could be, and were, fulfilled in ways not previously dreamed of. Certain post-Freudian scientists hold that dreams do not *mean* anything at all - Francis Crick, the co-discoverer of the structure of DNA, thinks of dreams as "an accidental by-product produced by random waves" [in Simpson, 1987], and Peter Medawar raises the possibility that they are "just ... *noise*."³⁷ For Freud, though, dreams always mean something, and they always mean, broadly speaking, the same thing: they are a (disguised) fulfilment of a (repressed)

³⁷"[T]hose who enjoy slopping around in the amniotic fluid should pause for a moment to entertain (perhaps only unconsciously in the first instance) the idea that the content of dreams may be totally devoid of 'meaning'. There should be no need to emphasize, in this century of radio sets and electronic devices, that many dreams may be assemblages of thought elements that convey no information whatsoever: that they may just be *noise*" [Medawar, 1996:42].

wish. If dreams often look meaningless, that is because the wishes that are being expressed dare not speak their name, and so must be clothed by the dream-work in a heavy disguise.

What about the nightmare, though? How can a dream from which one wakes up screaming be a wish-fulfilment? Freud's answer to this question is instructive:

The very frequent dreams which appear to stand in contradiction to my theory because their subject-matter is the frustration of a wish or the occurrence of something clearly unwished-for, may be brought together under the heading of 'counter-wish dreams'.... One of the two motive forces leading to such dreams is *the wish that I may be wrong*. These dreams appear regularly in the course of my treatments when a patient is in a state of resistance to me; and I can count almost certainly on provoking one of them after I have explained to a patient for the first time my theory that dreams are fulfilments of wishes. [SE, 4: 157-158 - emphasis added]

The contention that nightmares are a form of wish-fulfilment is supremely counter-intuitive. That doesn't mean that it is wrong, but it does mean, or ought to mean, that it requires some substantial support. But when Freud identifies as *one of the two motive forces leading to such dreams* a factor which can only ever be at play in the nightmares of his patients - that is, in an infinitesimally small fraction of people who have nightmares - he gives the strong impression that he is clutching at straws. Nor does the second motive force he mentions³⁸ offer a

³⁸Namely, the "masochistic component in the sexual constitution of many people People of this kind can have counter-wish dreams and unpleasurable dreams, which are none the less wish-fulfilments since they satisfy their masochistic inclinations" [ibid.]. Thus Freud's wish-fulfilment theory, as he outlines it in the *Dreams* book, can account for

universal reason why people should wish for nightmares. Freud, one suspects, believes that nightmares are wish-fulfilments only out of theoretical necessity, and goes in vague search of empirical support after the event.

Even a brief glance at Freud's theory of dreams reveals problems, then. But Freud was never going to get a better chance to validate his thesis about the determinacy of unconscious desire: for dreaming is an activity which is purely mental and from which the conscious mind is manifestly absent. In his next book, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, he was obliged to apply his hypotheses to phenomena which seldom satisfied both of these conditions, and sometimes satisfied neither. How did his principle that "nothing in the mind is arbitrary or undetermined" [Freud, 1966: 242] apply, for example, to the accidental knocking over of the lid of an inkpot: an event which seems to be entirely arbitrary and, more to the point, does not even seem to be a mental phenomenon? Like so: "seemingly accidental clumsy movements," Freud explains, "prove to be governed by an intention and achieve their aim with a certainty which cannot in general be credited to our conscious voluntary movements" [1966: 168]. For example:

It is very rare for me to break anything. I am not particularly dextrous but a result of the anatomical integrity of my nerve-muscle apparatus is that there are clearly no grounds for my making clumsy movements of this kind, with their unwelcome consequences.... Why then did I once dash the marble cover of my plain inkpot to the ground so that it broke?... The explanation was not hard to find. Some hours before, my sister ... [had] remarked:

nightmares only in two sub-groups of humanity: masochists, and people who wish to prove Freudian theory wrong.

'Your writing table looks really attractive now; only the inkstand doesn't match. You must get a nicer one.' I went out with my sister and did not return for several hours. But when I did I carried out, so it seems, the execution of the condemned inkstand. Did I perhaps conclude from my sister's remark that she intended to make me a present of a nice inkstand on the next festive occasion, and did I smash the unlovely one so as to force her to carry out the intention she had hinted at? If that is so, my sweeping movement was only apparently clumsy; in reality it was exceedingly adroit and well-directed, and understood how to avoid damaging any of the more precious objects that stood around. [1966: 167-168]

Thus are the wishes of the inner self projected into the outer world. The decadents, we will remember, had written off the world of action, because, as Wilde said, it was "a blind thing dependent on external influences ... the last resource of those who do not know how to dream." But external influences, Freud said reassuringly, were less powerful than one might have thought, and internal ones were more so. Action *was* a form of dream.

If this sounds far-fetched, it is worth remembering that Freud flirted with even more outlandish manifestations of the omnipotence of thoughts. He devoted serious attention, for example, to the question of telepathy. In Gay's account:

In 1926 he reminded Jones that he had long since harboured a 'favourable prejudice in favour of telepathy' and had held back only to protect psychoanalysis from too close a proximity to occultism. But recently 'the experiments that I have undertaken

with Ferenczi and my daughter have gained such a persuasive power for me, that diplomatic considerations had to take a back seat.... [I]f someone should reproach you with my Fall into Sin, you are free to reply that my adherence to telepathy is my private affair like my Jewishness, my passion for smoking and other things, and the theme of telepathy - inessential for psychoanalysis. [Gay: 444-445]

The theme of telepathy was inessential for decadent literature, too. But it was there on the periphery, and it was there for the same reason it was there in Freud: because it is a logical, if not a sensible, extension of the thesis that mental desire is omnipotent. Thus Yeats, in 1898, wrote that decadent art "comes to us at the moment when we are beginning to be interested in many things which positive science, the interpreter of exterior law, has always denied: communion of mind with mind in thought and without words, fore-knowledge in dreams and in visions ... and of much else ... " [Yeats, 1961: 191].

Both Freud and the decadents, then, described how desire plays under painfully cramped conditions, where it must resort to means artificial, subterranean, and frankly bizarre to find relief. For the decadents, this theme was clearly related to the stifling social conditions of the time. For Freud, that stifling quality was a permanent fixture in all human mental affairs. It is for this reason that Settembrini, the robust humanist in Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*, finds the theories of the mountain's resident psycho-analyst, Dr Krokowski, "unappetizing": "Analysis as an instrument of enlightenment and civilization is good," he says, "in so far as it shatters absurd convictions, acts as a solvent upon natural

prejudices, and undermines authority; good, in other words, in that it sets free, refines, humanizes, makes slaves ripe for freedom. But it is bad, very bad, in so far as it stands in the way of action, cannot shape the vital forces, maims life at its roots. Analysis can be a very unappetizing affair, as much so as death, with which it may well belong - allied to the grave and its unsavoury anatomy" [Mann: 1977: 222].

The unappetizing side of psychoanalysis becomes most apparent when Freud explains how his two principles of mental functioning, the pleasure principle and the reality principle, combine to make the human condition one of radical discontent. Effectively, the two principles constitute the jaws of a vice in which the mind was permanently trapped. Outlining this depressing proposition in *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud observes that the "purpose and object" of our lives is to

seek happiness ... to become happy and to remain so.... As we see, it is simply the pleasure principle which draws up the program of life's purpose. The principle dominates the operation of the mental apparatus from the very beginning. There can be no doubt about its efficiency, and yet its program is in conflict with the whole world.... It simply cannot be put into execution, the whole constitution of things runs counter to it; one might say the intention that man should be 'happy' is not included in the scheme of 'Creation'. What is called happiness in its narrowest sense comes from the satisfaction - most often instantaneous - of pent-up needs which have reached great intensity, and by its very nature can only be a transitory experience.... Our possibilities of happiness are thus limited from the start by our very constitution. It is much less difficult to be unhappy. [Freud, 1949a: 27-28]

In a nutshell, the cruel paradox of human life is this: "The goal towards which the pleasure principle impels us - of becoming happy - is not attainable; yet we may not - nay, cannot - give up the effort to come nearer to realization of it by some means or another" [1949a: 39].

If there is a single element of Freudian theory which decadent literature anticipated most heavily, this is it. Decadent literature can almost be defined by its furious obsession with this paradox. Axel refuses to kiss his mistress, because he knows that it will not live up to his ideal. Rimbaud complains that "Great music falls short of our desire" [Rimbaud, 1986: 240]. Wilde says that "To be entirely free, and at the same time entirely dominated by law, is the eternal paradox of human life that we realise at every moment ... " [Hart-Davis, 1986: 172]. Pater speaks of "that inexhaustible discontent, languer, and home-sickness, that endless regret, the chords of which ring all through our modern literature" [quoted by Eliot, 1930: 101]. Paul Bourget asks: "Ah, why is it the common law for all human creatures that pleasure is always disproportionate to the desire? Why is a yearning soul the dupe of a mirage that persuades it that it contains the means for a continuous taste of ecstasy?" [quoted by Pierrot, 1981: 269].

Des Esseintes encounters constant frustration of his "ardent aspirations towards an ideal, towards an unknown universe, towards a distant beatitude, as utterly desirable as that promised by the Scriptures" [Huysmans, 1987: 89]. Dorian Gray has a similarly "wild longing ... that our eyelids might open some morning upon a world that had been fashioned anew in the darkness for our pleasure.... It was the creation of such worlds as these that seemed to Dorian Gray to be the true object, or amongst the true objects, of life ... " [Wilde, 1988: 105]. And he, like Des Esseintes, is thwarted: "Life," he discovers, "is a great disappointment" [137] - a conclusion which is echoed by the novel's theoretical

mouthpiece, Lord Henry: "All ways end at the same point ... disillusion" [155].

Wilde recognised both jaws of the vice - the inevitability of the thirst for pleasure, and the inevitability of its disappointment - under his own name, too. In a letter written shortly after the publication of *Dorian Gray*, he told a correspondent that "I look forward to the time when aesthetics will be the dominant law of life: it will never be so, and so I look forward to it" [Lawler, 1988: 43]. And on his lecture tour of the United States, Wilde defined aestheticism as "the search after the secret of life.... Some people might search and not find anything. But the search, if carried on according to the right laws, would constitute aestheticism. They would find happiness in striving, even in despair of ever finding what they sought" [quoted by Ellmann, 1988: 151-152].

This cascade of despair is intelligible as an historical phenomenon, a product of a time when public reality was egregiously and lamentably distant from private desire. Sometimes, indeed, the decadents were plain about the historical specificity of their despair. Paul Bourget again:

When the human being is extremely civilized, he requires that things shall exist in accordance with the desires of his own heart, a coincidence made all the rarer by the fact that his heart is curiously refined, thus producing irremediable unhappiness.... The man who dreams up a setting of fascinating and complicated events for his personal destiny has every chance of finding the reality of things in disharmony with those dreams, *above all if he was born into an ageing civilization where a more general distribution of welfare is accompanied by a certain banality in private and public lifestyles.* [Quoted by Pierrot, 1981: 13-14 - emphasis added]

The book in which this passage appeared was called *Essais de Psychologie Contemporaine*. Was Freud, too, commenting merely on *contemporary* psychology when he suggested that reality was always in disharmony with our dreams?

A further Freudian element enters the decadent picture when Des Esseintes, in the presence of a prostitute, reflects miserably on the failure of his pleasure quest:

... the feverish desire for the unknown, the unsatisfied longing for an ideal, the craving to escape from the horrible realities of life, to cross the frontiers of thought, to grope after a certainty, albeit without finding one, in the misty upper regions of art! The paltriness of his own efforts was borne in upon him and cut him to the heart. He clasped the woman beside him in a gentle embrace, clinging to her like a child wanting to be comforted. [Huysmans, 1987: 115]

The reversion to childhood in this context is highly suggestive. Walter Pater is another decadent who invokes childhood, and other Freudian tropes besides, when speaking of the friction between desire and reality in the 'Denys L'Auxerrois' chapter of *Imaginary Portraits*:

Almost every people, as we know, has had its legend of a 'golden age' and of its return - legends which will hardly be forgotten, however prosaic the world may become, while man himself remains the aspiring, never quite contented being he is. And yet in truth, since we are no longer children, we might well question the return to us of a condition of life in which, by the nature of the case, the value of things would, so to speak, lie wholly on their

surfaces, unless we could regain also the childish consciousness, *or rather unconsciousness*, in ourselves, to take all that adroitly and with the appropriate lightness of heart. The dream, however, has been left for the most part in the vagueness of dreams: in their waking hours people have been too busy to furnish it with details. [1948: 180 - emphasis added]

Passages like this can leave us in no doubt: there is a relationship between decadent writing and the insights of Freud which simply cannot be ignored. The question is what kind of relationship it was. A Freudian would have no trouble interpreting the above passage as a vindication of psychoanalytical theory. For in the space of a single paragraph Pater speaks of the kind of unsatisfied yearnings one might associate with the pleasure principle, and expresses a dim awareness that the possibility of satisfaction might lie somewhere in childhood, in dreams, in the unconscious. But to envy the blissful unconsciousness of a child, its interest only in the surface of things, is an attitude which can also be construed historically, as part of the decadent recoil from that "modern life" which Wilde defined as "complex and relative. Those are its two distinguishing notes" [Hart-Davis, 1986: 188].

But, the Freudian will reply, doesn't Pater explicitly detach his reflections from history here? Doesn't he define "man" in general - not merely decadent "man" - as an "aspiring, never quite contented being"; doesn't he say that *almost every people* yearns for a golden age? This is no doubt true; but few yearned for a golden age with the peculiar force of the decadents. To quote John Stuart Mill, from his 1831 essay 'The Spirit of the Age': "the idea of comparing one's own age with former ages, or with our notion of those which are yet to come, had occurred to philosophers; *but it never before was itself the dominant idea of any age*"

[quoted by Eksteins, 1985: 3 - emphasis added]. Similarly, literature before the decadents and since them has entertained the theme of longing met by disappointment. But no other literature has been so pathologically obsessed by it. What other period could possibly have given us *À Rebours*? What other literature has been so exclusively determined to show us humanity, in Nietzsche's memorable image, rubbing itself raw against the bars of its cage? Who else but a decadent could have produced a poem like this:

Last night, ah, yesternight, betwixt her lips and mine
There fell thy shadow, Cynara! thy breath was shed
Upon my soul between the kisses and the wine;
And I was desolate and sick of an old passion,
 Yea, I was desolate and bowed my head:
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

All night upon mine heart I felt her warm heart beat,
Night-long within mine arms in love and sleep she lay;
Surely the kisses of her bought red mouth were sweet;
But I was desolate and sick of an old passion,
 When I awoke and found the dawn was gray:
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

I have forgot much, Cynara! gone with the wind,
Flung roses, roses riotously with the throng,
Dancing to put thy pale lost lilies out of mind;
But I was desolate and sick of an old passion,
 Yea, all the time, because the dance was long:
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

I cried for madder music and for stronger wine,
But when the feast is finished and the lamps expire,
Then falls thy shadow, Cynara! the night is thine;
And I am desolate and sick of an old passion,
 Yea, hungry for the lips of my desire:
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.
[Stanford, 1965: 64]

The shadow that always falls between desire and its fulfilment; the invisible ideal so pressing that the physical world - the kiss of the whore - seems negligible beside it. It is a poem about the speaker's unrequited love, but it is also a poem about the decadent condition, which might be defined as an unrequited love for the world. In *Cynara* the condition has reached, almost literally, fever pitch: we are dealing unmistakably with an illness, with a psyche *desolate and sick*, and we can only hope that Freud was wrong when he made such a condition the inevitable human lot. When Pater, writing in *Imaginary Portraits*, imputed his own decadent condition to Watteau, he could be frank and call it a sickness. "He has been a sick man all his life. He was always a seeker after something in the world that is there in no satisfying measure, or not at all" [quoted by Aldington, 1948: 23].³⁹ Yeats, writing about Lionel Johnson, tells us: "One day ... he spoke of 'a craving that made every

³⁹That Pater is indeed being autobiographical here is confirmed by Richard Aldington: "The first sentence is true: Watteau suffered from tuberculosis. The second sentence is a perfect summing up of Walter Pater, but there is little in the records of Watteau's life or in his paintings to suggest that it has any truth at all as far as he is concerned" [Aldington, 1948: 23].

atom of his body cry out' and said the moment after, 'I do not want to be cured' ... " [1955: 310].

Not wanting to be cured was no doubt a part of the illness. But ultimately the decadent *had* to be cured. One could not live forever in the state of the narrator of 'Cynara', or of Des Esseintes. Barbey d'Aurevilly, after reading *À Rebours*, suggested that its author was left with only one choice: between "the muzzle of a pistol and the foot of the Cross" [Baldick, 1987: 12]. Indeed Huysmans himself had recognised, at the novel's end, that the condition of Des Esseintes required a remedy.

Des Esseintes told [his doctor] of his unrealizable ideals and was beginning to outline new experiments in colour, to talk about new combinations and contrasts that he meant to organize, when the doctor threw cold water on his enthusiasm by declaring in peremptory fashion that wherever he put his ideas into effect it would certainly not be in that house.

Then, without giving him time to breathe, he stated that he had attended to the most urgent problem first by putting right the digestive functions, and that he now must tackle the general nervous trouble, which had not cleared up at all and to do so would require years of strict dieting and careful nursing. He concluded by saying that before trying any particular remedy ... he would have to abandon this solitary existence, to go back to Paris, to lead a normal life again, and above all to try and enjoy the same pleasures as other people.... The doctor ... assured him that this radical change of life he prescribed was in his opinion a matter of life and death - that it meant the difference between a good recovery on the one hand and insanity speedily followed by tuberculosis on the other. [Huysmans, 1987: 211]

There is an echo of this prescription in the comments of those critics who condemned decadence as a disease from which literature had to recover. Edmund Wilson, whom we have already observed in a jaded mood towards the end of *Axel's Castle*, lays his cards on the table during the book's conclusion. Having watched decadent literature enact again and again its sterile stalemate between private desire and public reality, Wilson finds that he needs some air:

I believe ... that the time is at hand when these writers ... will no longer serve us as guides. Axel's world of the private imagination in isolation from the life of society seems to have been exploited and explored as far as for the present is possible.... [W]ho hereafter will be content to inhabit a corner, though fitted out with some choice things of one's own, in the shuttered house of one of these writers - where we find ourselves, also, becoming conscious of a lack of ventilation? [Wilson, 1947: 292]

William Empson, using a different metaphor, expressed a similar complaint: Symbolism, he said, "is the poetry of the hamstrung, the people who have cut the strings in their legs. Such a poet cannot go where he wants to; he has to sit and wait like a barnacle and seize on any associations of the kind he wants that happen to drift toward him. This is a distinctive condition, and not pretty.... The truth is, it is high time they got the use of their legs back" [Empson, 1988: 170].

These suggestions are all very well, if the ailment in question is confined to a particular school of literature. But as I have argued, Freud imputed the decadent condition, or something very like it, to the whole of civilized humanity. If insular anti-realism in *literature* proved a dead-

end, it doesn't really matter; it was an interesting dead-end, and there are other roads to go down. But Freud's proposition that *life* is a dead-end is somewhat more alarming. What window can *we* throw open to relieve the lack of ventilation; how can *we* get the use of our legs back?

There is an interesting passage in the *New Introductory Lectures* which offers one possible answer. Writing about the alleged restrictions imposed on human development by religious thinking, Freud suggests that:

Intellect ... or rather, to call it by a more familiar name, reason - is among the forces which may be expected to exercise a unifying influence upon men - creatures who can be held together only with the greatest difficulty, and whom it is therefore scarcely possible to control. Think how impossible human society would be if every one had his own particular multiplication table, and his own private units of weight and length. Our best hope for the future is that the intellect - the scientific spirit, reason - should in time establish a dictatorship over the human mind.... [T]he common pressure exercised by such a domination of reason would prove to be the strongest unifying force among men, and would prepare the way for further unifications. Whatever, like the ban laid upon thought by religion, opposes such a development is a danger for the future of mankind. [Freud, 1933: 234 - 235]

There is something else which opposes such a development, and which therefore, on Freud's own terms, should be considered "a danger for the future of mankind": namely, the theoretical propositions of psychoanalysis. Doesn't psychoanalysis itself, especially its idea of a determinate unconscious, present a severe obstacle to the domination of

reason? Doesn't the cultural malaise that Freud associates with religious belief - a malaise characterised by the inhibition of proper perception, by the dominance of unreason - correspond precisely to that hamstringing of humanity which Freudian theory perpetrates when followed to its decadent ends? It was Freud himself, not Christ or Buddha, who limited the human mind with his suggestion that "only for the rarest and best-adjusted mind does it seem possible to preserve the picture of external reality, as it is perceived, against the distortion to which it is normally subjected in its passage through the psychical individuality of the percipient". This model of perception, as we have seen, came awfully close to the thinking of Freud's decadent contemporaries, whose notions about the individual's ownership of truth ended precisely in that assertion of private multiplication tables - two plus two equals five, said Wilde - which Freud attempts to represent as the very antithesis of his own project. The idea that people are "creatures who can be held together only with the greatest difficulty, and whom it is therefore scarcely possible to control" - the fulcrum of Freud's above remarks - is an article of faith in psychoanalysis; but one could argue that it is less self-evidently and pressingly true in the real world than it is between the covers of Freud's increasingly pessimistic books. Once one has accepted it as a truth, though, then one is bound to think that human society will quiver more or less permanently on the brink of meltdown, of atomisation, unless in the future some unifying force is imposed.

But Freudian theory debars the very solution to the crisis that Freud advances. His evangelical faith in the unifying potential of reason does not sit easily beside his dark theoretical belief that "man is not master in his own house", that irrational motives govern our behaviour, that reason is a far weaker force than people suppose. If Freud is to be consistent, he must admit that the same theories which make the need

for a rational unification of humanity so urgent also deem it impossible. In darker moods Freud admitted this point. "The ideal condition of things would of course be a community of men who had subordinated their instinctual life to the dictatorship of reason," he wrote in 'Why War?' (1932). "Nothing else could unite men so completely and so tenaciously, even if there were no emotional ties between them. *But in all probability,*" he adds glumly, "*that is a Utopian speculation*" [Freud, 1950l: 284 - emphasis added]. Karl Kraus said that psychoanalysis is the disease for which it presents itself as the cure. But when Freud faces the gloomy implications of his own theories, we are obliged to modify Kraus's aphorism. Psychoanalysis is the disease for which psychoanalysis proclaims there can be no cure. Conscious that his own theories implied a lack of ventilation, Freud reached to open a window - only to find that he had shut it, locked it, and thrown away the key.

THREE

“Fathers are certainly not popular just at present”: Decadent Literature and the Oedipus Complex

In 1897, the year in which Freud first identified the phenomenon that he would later name the ‘Oedipus complex’,¹ Stéphane Mallarmé published his *Divagations*, which contained the essay ‘Crisis in Verse’. “Whoever grants literature a primary importance - or any importance - must recognise the momentousness of the present hour,” wrote Mallarmé in that essay:

we are witnessing upheavals which suggest the finale of a century.... A French reader, whose habits were interrupted by the death of Victor Hugo [in 1885], can only be disconcerted. In the course of his mysterious mission, Hugo reduced all prose - philosophy, eloquence, history - to verse, and as he incarnated verse itself he virtually confiscated the thinker’s, the orator’s and the historian’s right to expression: a monument in a silent desert, he was as well the concealed god of a majestic, unconscious idea which said that the form we call verse is itself, quite simply, literature.... Poetry waited respectfully, so to speak, for the giant - who identified it with his increasingly firm and tenacious blacksmith’s hand - to disappear; and then it broke loose. The

¹See Freud’s letter to Fliess of October 15, 1897. “Only one idea of general value has occurred to me. I have found love of the mother and jealousy of the father in my own case too, and now believe it to be a general phenomenon of early childhood...” [Freud, A. et al., 1954: 223].

entire language had been geared to prosody and drew from it the vital sense of pause; but then it broke away, scattering freely its innumerable basic elements, having suddenly become like a verbal orchestration of multiple sounds. [Mallarmé, 1980: 2]

Isn't there something oedipal about this passage? Reading Mallarmé's dance on the grave of the poetic patriarch today, it is difficult not to ask oneself this question, and once one has asked the question it is nearly impossible to arrive at any answer but 'yes'. During the century since its formulation, Freud's notion of the Oedipus complex has metamorphosed from an outlandish hypothesis into something approaching conventional wisdom. Even if one is not a card-carrying Freudian, one finds oneself pouncing suspiciously, or superstitiously, on words like *concealed god, giant, firm and tenacious hand*, and moving effortlessly to the conclusion that Mallarmé's attack on the authority of Hugo is underwritten by that hostility to the father that lurks in the psyches of all normal males.

What assumptions do we make *en route* to this extraordinary conclusion? To begin with, we make a substantial leap of faith when we entertain the possibility (which swiftly hardens into a probability) that the true object of Mallarmé's hostility here is his *father* - a figure to whom there is not the slenderest of allusions in the actual text. But that leap, while audaciously large, is still not sufficient to land us at our conclusion that this hostility is oedipal - for 'oedipal hostility' is not, or should not be, a mere synonym for hostility to one's father *per se*. The (male) Oedipus complex, we should remember, has *two* emotional constituents: "love of the mother," as Freud explained in his landmark letter to Fliess

of October 1897, "and jealousy of the father."² These two components are not only linked, they are prioritised: jealousy of the father is a consequence, an epiphenomenon, of love of the mother. On the basis of this information, it would seem fair to conclude that hostility to the father is a necessary condition of an "oedipal" sentiment, but not a sufficient one. In other words, even if Mallarmé's essay were peppered with explicit derogatory references to his actual father, which it clearly isn't, it still would not qualify as *self-evidently* oedipal. One would need, in addition to that hostility, evidence of its connection with an underlying desire for the mother before the adjective "oedipal" could be fully justified.

But evidence, the Freudian will reply with some justice, is necessarily scarce in the case of such taboo desires. If Mallarmé really *did* rejoice in the death of his father,³ then he would hardly come right out and say so. Such emotions are too heinous to articulate *even to oneself*, which is precisely why they have been pushed into the unconscious in the first place. As far as evidence of such a deeply repressed desire is concerned, then, vague allusions are as much as we can expect. Similarly, the Freudian would continue, a certain lack of evidence of

²When unveiling the theory in the letter quoted above, Freud calls mother-love and father-envy "a general phenomenon of early childhood". But strictly speaking these phenomena are not general at all - they occur only in the case of the male. This sexist slip inaugurates what will become, as the oedipal theory unfolds, an enduring vice of Freud's - namely, that of writing as if the female subject did not exist. His focus, as we will see, fell almost exclusively on the complex of the male. More often than not, it is left to the reader - in this first instance Wilhelm Fliess - to reshuffle the male-centred formulations in order to deduce the conditions of the female complex. The very term 'Oedipus complex' crystallises this sexist bias, of course. Freud never deigned to give the female complex its own name. As late as the *Outline of Psychoanalysis*, the book he was writing when he died, he was still speaking of "the feminine Oedipus attitude" - adding laconically, in parentheses, that "the name of 'Electra Complex' has been proposed for it" [1949: 99]. One needn't point out how insidiously that phrase "feminine Oedipus attitude" subordinates the female complex to that of the male. But I hope to show that Freud can be convicted of something far worse than sexism here. Freud's silence about the female subject might well point us towards a fatal defect in the theory of the Oedipus complex.

³A death which had occurred, incidentally, back in 1863, a good twenty years before Hugo's.

Mallarmé's sexual yearning for his mother ought not to surprise us. Indeed a *complete* lack of evidence, such as we have here, is perhaps even more telling, for that absence only serves to demonstrate how comprehensively the impulse has been repressed. So if we persist in calling the above passage "oedipal", despite the absence of direct internal evidence of either of the desires which constitute the Oedipus complex, we are not breaking the rules of psychoanalysis.

If we strip the Freudian argument of terms like 'repression' and 'the unconscious', and examine its logic, it begins to look less impressive. What it says, in essence, is that a male person cannot express hostility to any older male person without really speaking of something else: his parallel hostility to his actual father. Moreover, it assumes that hostility to one's actual father can only ever have one motive: sexual jealousy.

Let us concentrate on this second assumption. It is an extreme view, and it was never advanced as a formal principle of psychoanalysis, but it certainly seems to inform many of Freud's own interpretations. As we shall see, Freud was not averse to treating hostility to the father and the Oedipus complex as if they were entirely synonymous things: any negative thought you have about your father, even if it occurs while he is beating you,⁴ is by definition a manifestation of sexual love for your mother. The principle that a cigar is sometimes just a cigar - a formula designed to reassure us that Freud does not, God forbid, hold the implausible theory that *everything* has an ulterior motive - seems not to be in force when it comes to father-hostility. When psychoanalysing literature, Freud clearly considered the presence of parricidal themes enough to define a work as oedipal; indeed he seemed to consider it something of a rare treat when evidence of an erotic attachment to the

⁴See the discussion of the 'Rat Man' beginning on page 224.

mother - the impulse, it should be remembered, that supposedly lay at the heart of the complex - appeared too.⁵

To ascribe the parricidal theme to latent sexual motives seems especially bold in cases where it can readily be explained with reference to patent non-sexual motives. Mallarmé, for example, had some perfectly good *conscious* reasons to resent Victor Hugo - and for that matter his own father, as we shall see. But to confine ourselves for the moment to the resentment of Hugo, Mallarmé's motives become transparent enough if we momentarily extend him the courtesy of listening to what he purports to be saying. He speaks of a crisis in verse, a joyous dismantling of poetic form which came as a backlash against forces of excessive restraint. We know from the previous chapter that this situation was no mere figment of Mallarmé's fancy: his age indeed saw an authentic upheaval in the world of art, an upheaval which reflected a general metaphysical crisis among *fin-de-siècle* Europeans. Once we accept that this historical climate existed, it becomes possible, more than possible, to trace Mallarmé's hostility to the stern patriarch Hugo to this context, to read it as an expression of that spirit of decadence which opposed itself to all that was old, static, authoritarian, conservative, institutional. Do we really need to search for hidden reasons why Mallarmé, during such an era, might have been unfriendly to a figure who had embodied, or seemed to embody, nearly all of these objectionable things?⁶ When we restore it to the historical context from

⁵Take, for example, these sentences from his essay on 'Dostoevsky and Parricide': "It can scarcely be owing to chance that three of the masterpieces of the literature of all time - the *Oedipus Rex* of Sophocles, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* - should all deal with the same subject, parricide. In all three, *moreover*, the motive of the deed, sexual rivalry for a woman, is laid bare" [1961: 188 - emphasis added]. I will analyse this statement in more detail later (see Chapter Four, page 293).

⁶J.-K. Huysmans was another writer who detected something fatherly in the objectionable qualities of Victor Hugo. Des Esseintes, when reading Hugo, finds that: "The Oriental, *patriarchal* aspect was too trite and hollow to retain his interest, while the nursery-maidish, grandfatherly pose annoyed him intensely" [Huysmans, 1987: 190 - emphasis added]. This sharp echo of Mallarmé's sentiments can only strengthen our opinion that

which the Freudian reading has ripped it, Mallarmé's 'parricidal' outburst looks less like a projection of private psychology, and more like a personified distillation of the antinomian spirit of the times.

So the decadent context supplies us with a way of explaining the phenomenon of "father-hostility", one which does insist on its link to a wholly invisible mother-love. This historical approach can also be used to explain another quasi-parricidal event from the psyche of Mallarmé: his less than grief-stricken response to the death of his actual father. "Their relationship was not, nor had it ever been, a particularly close one," one of Mallarmé's biographers tells us. "At the time of his father's death, Mallarmé rejected virtually everything he stood for" [Millan, 1994: 78]. A Freudian explanation seems superfluous here, for we are presented with two salient biographical facts which render the son's attitude wholly intelligible. The first is the fact that Mallarmé's relationship with his father was "not ... a particularly close one." In other words, their relationship was characterised by certain *particular* tensions capable of accounting for the son's hostility. The second is that Mallarmé rejected not his father *per se*, but rather "virtually everything he *stood for*." This phrase reminds us that Mallarmé *père* was more than just the cardboard cut-out husband of his son's alleged primal love object. He stood for other things too, including that range of obnoxious social practices and institutions which the decadent generation found so repugnant, and whose *patriarchal* nature is obvious enough. In sum, if we ascribe Mallarmé's "parricidal" feelings to the universal motives posited by the theory of the Oedipus complex, we do so at the cost of deeming certain glaring particularities of his case irrelevant. This

they were an articulation of a public mood, rather than an indulgence of an obscure private desire.

suppression of the particular, as we shall see, is a vice which characterises many an oedipal reading of *fin-de-siècle* literature.

If the motives behind Mallarmé's parricidal leanings were not universal in the sense of being present across all cultures and times, were they universal in the more limited sense of being widespread through *his* culture and time? How many fathers of that era were distant from their sons? How many sons of the time were disturbed by what their fathers "stood for"?

If we turn to decadent literature, we will find that the answer is - *many*. Mallarmé was by no means the only writer of the time to register discontent with a father, or a father-figure. The father in the decadent novel or play tends to be either a tyrant, or a buffoon, or both, or dead. He has either far too much or far too little authority; either way, he tends to inspire filial revolt. Sometimes, indeed, the decadents can get downright parricidal: "In literature," said Oscar Wilde, "you must always kill your father."⁷ Dorian Gray, slightly modifying this principle, kills the painter of his portrait; and the portrait, enacting another subtle variation of it, kills Dorian. Marius the Epicurean, when he thinks of his dead father, feels "a not unpleasant sense of liberty" [1921: 16]; and then there is *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), the period's most resonant contribution to the literature of parricide. The literature of Freud's age exhibits a hostility to fathers, and to father-figures, that is pronounced enough to require some form of explanation. But the Freudian form of explanation seems inadequate, for it must leave two crucial questions unanswered. Why did the supposedly universal Oedipus complex produce such a proliferation of evidence at this particular moment in history? And why did this evidence point only to the destructive side of the complex - why

⁷This was in response to a friend who detected hints of Flaubert's 'Hérodias' in Wilde's *Salomé*. See Ellmann, 1988: 354-355.

was there no corresponding cavalcade of evidence of the erotic desires from which Freud supposed father-hostility to spring?

On the other hand, if we are able to historicise these parricidal themes, by demonstrating their deep continuity with that culturally-inspired spirit of negation⁸ that impelled the decadence, then these questions will not arise. We will be left with a different kind of question - the question of whether the theory of the Oedipus complex is itself a mere historical artefact. Did Freud, in supposing father-hatred to be a permanent presence in the (male) psyche,⁹ mistake a peculiarly Victorian psychological trope for a universal one? A lot is at stake when we probe the validity of the Oedipus complex. "I venture to assert," as Freud wrote late in his life, "that if psychoanalysis could boast of no other achievement than the repressed Oedipus complex, that alone would give it a claim to be counted among the more precious new acquisitions of mankind" [1949: 97]. If an "achievement" so fundamental to psychoanalysis proves to have been constructed on tainted evidence, then clearly we will have a right to wonder about the legitimacy of Freud's "science" as a whole.

⁸In *The Rebel*, Camus defines the dandy's aesthetic as one of "singularity and negation.... The dandy is, by occupation, always in opposition. He can only exist by defiance. Up till now, man derived his coherence from his Creator. But from the moment that he consecrates his rupture with Him, he finds himself delivered over to the fleeting moment, to the passing days, and to wasted sensibility. Therefore he must take himself in hand. The dandy rallies his forces and creates a unity for himself by the very violence of his refusal. Disoriented, like all people without a rule of life, he is coherent as a character. But a character implies a public; the dandy can only play a part by setting himself up in opposition" [Camus, 1971: 47-48].

⁹At this point one can begin to see why Freud's confusion of the male complex with the complex as such might amount to a shortcoming worse than mere sexism. We seldom hear about - *nor are we presented with evidence of* - the phenomenon of female hostility to the mother. Instead we are asked to believe that this phenomenon exists on the grounds that male hostility to the father is demonstrable. But if the son's hostility can be satisfactorily explained without reference to his alleged incestuous desires, then why should we believe that females do harbour a corresponding hostility to their mothers? Freud's silence on the complex of the female, then, leaves him highly vulnerable here, for an inquiry into the historical warping of oedipal data in the case of males is instantly magnified into an interrogation of the validity of the theory of the Oedipus complex as a whole.

Before we proceed, we ought to be clear about a problem that is bound to hamper any inquiry of this kind. Psychoanalysis has a kind of built-in resistance to attempts to historicise it, because it proposes that much of what one might naively call history is really a projection of private psychological patterns. As far as the present project is concerned, this resistance presents us with the following difficulty: as rigorously as we trace the father-hostility of Freud's contemporaries to the revolutionary social atmosphere of the time, psychoanalysis will always be ready to reply that that atmosphere was a product of the revolutionaries' oedipal hostilities in the first place. In light of this theoretical resilience, it hardly matters how impressive a body of evidence we assemble in support of our position, because Freud would query the very status of the evidence - he would claim it, indeed, as evidence in support of *his* position. It is a kind of philosophical impasse - as if, during a murder trial, the prosecution were to submit graphic video footage of the accused committing the crime; and the defence, instead of engaging with the contents of the tape, were to dispute its very existence, by branding it an imaginary product of the prosecution's desire that the accused be found guilty. Could the prosecution conclusively prove the defence wrong?

Let us consider an example of Freud's practice of converting historical "reality" into an expression of the Oedipus complex. It comes from his 1910 paper on 'Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood'. Freud is discussing Leonardo's dictum that "He who amidst the struggle of opinions calls upon authority, works with his memory rather than his reason." As a would-be scientist himself, Freud acknowledges that this outlook is *correct*, and that it enabled Leonardo to become "the first modern natural scientist ... the first man since the time of the Greeks to probe the secrets of nature while relying solely on

observation and his own judgement" [Freud, 1964: 72]. But to Freud it is neither here nor there that Leonardo might have had perfectly sound scientific reasons to reject the erroneous theories of the ancients. The objective value of his outlook is merely a lucky accident, for its origin lay in Leonardo's subjective desires:

In teaching that authority should be looked down on and that imitation of the 'ancients' should be repudiated, and in constantly urging that the study of nature was the source of all truth, he was merely repeating - in the highest sublimation attainable by man - the one-sided point of view which had already forced itself on the little boy as he gazed in wonder on the world. If we translate scientific abstraction back again into concrete individual experience, we see that the 'ancients' and authority simply corresponded to his father, and nature once more becomes the tender and kindly mother who had nourished him. [1964: 72]

So we are up against a theory which considers science and history, and truth and error, to be *abstractions*, and baseless speculations about the childhood wishes of a man who died two centuries ago to be *concrete*.¹⁰ If Leonardo's profoundly valid defence of scientific empiricism can so effortlessly be written off as an oedipal fantasy, then what hope do we have of establishing that a mere literary theme, that of parricide, had a contemporary public significance which discredits the view that it was a private wish-fulfilment?

¹⁰Much of Freud's essay turns on a dream which the young Leonardo had about a "vulture" - a bird emblematic of femininity and motherhood. Unfortunately for Freud, the German translation of Leonardo's notebooks on which he relied was faulty on this point: the bird of which Leonardo dreamed was actually a *nibbio*, a kite. As Peter Gay puts it, "the superstructure that Freud built on the mistranslation collapses into dust" [Gay, 1988: 273].

There are several ways of dealing with this problem. We could throw up our hands and abandon the project as futile. We could conclude that psychoanalysis must be right, because it has an answer for everything. Ideally, of course, one would like simply to suspend the question of whether psychoanalysis is wrong or right, and to find out which of these alternatives is more likely in view of the evidence. But as I have pointed out, the evidence looks like one thing if you believe that psychoanalysis is wrong, and another thing if you believe it is right. This makes it very difficult to weigh up the truth-claims of psychoanalysis from a neutral perspective. The best one can do, then, is to be as honest as possible about one's lack of neutrality. I will therefore admit at once that the following consideration of oedipal theory in its historical context is hostile to psychoanalysis from the start, for it entails the *a priori* assumption that social forces are sufficiently concrete, and private psychology sufficiently malleable, for the former to exert a substantial influence on the latter - an assumption with which Freud would appear to have vigorously disagreed. This is not to say that my disbelief in the theory of the Oedipus complex is in itself an *a priori* attitude. On the contrary, one has to observe Freud's theory in action in a variety of contexts before one can gain a full appreciation of its myriad deficiencies. What these deficiencies are will become clear enough during the remainder of this chapter.

What the Father "Stood For"

Even on Freud's own terms, there is a certain kind of male writer who can speak of parricidal currents in history without inviting the allegation

that he is indulging an oedipal fantasy. This is the writer who detects such currents from a father's perspective, rather than a son's. Leo Tolstoy was one such *fin-de-siècle* father. Writing in his diary in June 1889, Tolstoy hazards a striking speculation.

Thought: aren't the bad feelings children have for their parents due to the contempt they feel for their parents because of their sensuality? They feel it somehow. Verochka K. hates her parents.
[Christian, 1994: 217]

Read superficially, this "thought" might look like a fully-fledged anticipation of Freud, one in which both halves of the Oedipus complex - sensuality and hostility - are mentioned together. But on closer examination the phenomenon identified by Tolstoy has little to do with the Oedipus complex. According to Freud's theory, a child feels, broadly speaking, desire for the parent of the opposite sex and resentment for the parent of its own sex.¹¹ Tolstoy, on the other hand, paints a picture in

¹¹To speak less broadly, one should take note of the fact that Freud complicated this basic model with two additional considerations. One is that the boy's feelings for his father are not exclusively hostile: there is also a certain amount of affection, which means that the boy's aggregate attitude to his father will be one of "ambivalence". As Freud explained in *The Ego and the Id* (1923):

In its simplified form the case of a male child can be described as follows. At a very early age the boy develops an object-cathexis for his mother, which originally related to the mother's breast and is the prototype of an object-choice on the anaclitic model; the boy deals with his father by identifying himself with him. For a time these two relationships proceed side by side, until the boy's sexual wishes for his mother become more intense and the father is perceived as an obstacle to them; with this the Oedipus complex originates. His identification with his father then takes on a hostile colouring and changes into a wish to get rid of his father in order to take his place with his mother. Henceforward his relation to his father is ambivalent.... An ambivalent attitude to his father and an object-relation of a solely affectionate kind to his mother make up the content of the simple positive Oedipus complex in a boy. [Freud, 1991d: 374]

Matters are clouded further by the consideration that the boy is also bi-sexual. "The matter is made more difficult to grasp," as Freud put it in 1925, "by the complicating circumstance that even in boys the Oedipus complex has a double orientation, active and passive, in accordance with their bisexual constitution; a boy also wants to take his

which children feel simply “bad feelings” and “contempt” for both of their parents. In such a context, a son’s resentment of his father hardly qualifies as ‘oedipal’, since he will have equally negative feelings towards his mother. Tolstoy’s reference to sensuality is really a red herring, an off-the-cuff attempt to account for a phenomenon which he thinks of as a given: namely, hatred of parents by their children. This point is clarified by an entry Tolstoy makes the following month: “Thought: what an astonishing thing - lack of respect by children for their parents and elders in all classes of society has become an epidemic! It’s an important sign of the times: respect and obedience from fear is finished, it’s had its day, and freedom has appeared” [1994: 220].

Having dropped the sensuality theory, Tolstoy here advances another possible reason for filial disrespect: it is a function of the age, a “sign of the times.” By now, of course, we are beginning to suspect that

mother’s place as the love-object of his father - a fact which we describe as the feminine attitude” [Freud, 1950a: 188].

In light of these theoretical elaborations, isn’t it unacceptably crude to speak as though Freud proposed that a boy’s attitude to his father was generally hostile? Not necessarily. For one thing, Freud was not averse to speaking that way himself: for every passage in which he defines the Oedipus complex as containing an *ambivalent* attitude towards the father one can find another passage in which he refers to that attitude as straightforwardly hostile. In the letter in which he revealed the Oedipus phenomenon to Fliess, for example, he defined it as “love of the mother and jealousy of the father” [see note 1 above]. In 1922 he wrote: “In the very earliest years of childhood ... a convergence of the sexual impulses occurs of which, in the case of boys, the object is the mother. This choice of an object, in conjunction with a corresponding attitude of rivalry and hostility towards the father, provides the content of what is known as the *Oedipus Complex*...” [1950p: 120 - emphasis in original]. And in *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, which Freud was working on when he died, he tells us that “the Oedipus Complex [is] so named because *its essential substance* is found in the Greek myth of King Oedipus, which has luckily been preserved for us in a version from the hand of a great dramatist. The Greek hero killed his father and married his mother” [1949b: 88 - emphasis added].

These quotations from Freud himself confirm that we are wholly within our rights to believe that the *tendency* of the boy’s father-complex is jealous hostility. Freud’s phrase “essential substance” is a pertinent one in the present context. We do not need Freud to tell us that young boys feel affection for their fathers, and wish to be like them. But the idea that those boys also want to kill their fathers is incontestably novel: it is the “essential substance” of the Freudian position on son-father relations. Theoretically it is only one part of an ambivalence, but in practice it is clearly the dominant term of the ambivalence. The affection by which it is accompanied does not seem to be potent enough to generate many dreams of union with the father; indeed it is not even strong enough to stop the generation of fantasies, or in certain cases even acts, of parricide. It can only make one feel guilty about them afterwards.

Tolstoy's continuing attempt to explain this general trend of children disrespecting their parents is really an attempt to explain his own children's disrespect of him. Whether or not he was deluded in ascribing his domestic problems wholly to the *Zeitgeist* is a moot question; but it is only fair to say that his account of the nature of that *geist* looks sound enough. The trends of which Tolstoy speaks - the lack of respect from fear, the failure to respect authority merely because it *is* authority - were, as we have seen in the previous chapter, among the defining trends of the *fin de siècle*. Morals, manners, language, religious belief - all these things were increasingly being thought of as matters of convention only. Authority was everywhere being exposed as contingent, arbitrary - a contract from which the ruled had the power to withhold their signatures. This perception permeated decadent literature. Oscar Wilde plays comically with it in 'The Canterville Ghost', in which the venerable old spirit of Canterville Chase attempts to scare away some new tenants, but is hampered by their blunt refusal to be terrified by him. The tenants, being modern and materialistic (traits Wilde underscores by making them Americans) are scandalously unresponsive to the ghost's authority. Here is one of them encountering the ghost for the first time:

His eyes were as red as burning coals; long grey hair fell over his shoulders in matted coils; his garments, which were of antique cut, were soiled and ragged, and from his wrists and ankles hung heavy manacles and rusty gyves.

'My dear sir,' said Mr Otis, "I really must insist on your oiling those chains, and have brought you for that purpose a small bottle of the Tammany Rising Sun Lubricator "

For a moment the Canterville Ghost stood quite motionless in natural indignation; then, dashing the bottle violently upon the

polished floor, he fled down the corridor.... Never, in a brilliant and uninterrupted career of three hundred years, had he been so grossly insulted. [1988: 196-197]

Wilde's story could almost have been written to illustrate Tolstoy's point that "respect and obedience from fear is finished, it's had its day". But while Wilde speculates on the ramifications of *fin-de-siècle* scepticism in the spirit world, Tolstoy is concerned with its impact on real power relations. Tolstoy's fear is that there was no reason why the authority of a parent - or, to be realistic about the way his family and others like it were structured, the authority of a *father* - should have been immune from this general spirit of insubordination. His fear seems justified enough once we move beyond the one-dimensional conception of the father proffered by Freud (who viewed the father merely as the villain in a domestic love-triangle), and take, instead, a view of the father that encompasses his social dimension, his villainy on a wider stage, his role as the domestic emissary of a political system in which power was distributed unfairly and wielded tyrannically.

In the previous chapter, I suggested that much of the era's scepticism radiated from a central form of disbelief: the loss of faith in God. In the present context, God's demise takes on additional significance. It was not merely the *authority* of this ultimate father which had relied entirely on the faith of His children: His very *existence* had. To lose faith in Him was therefore to murder Him. "God is dead," as Nietzsche's madman said, "and we have killed him." Atheism amounted to an act of spiritual parricide.

Freud did not overlook the nexus between religious scepticism and hostility to literal fathers. On the contrary, he stressed it. But as we

would expect, he saw hostility to the flesh-and-blood father as the root form of disbelief, and atheism as one of its many flowers. Psychoanalysis, Freud explained, “has shown us that a personal God is, psychologically, nothing other than an exalted father, and it brings us evidence every day of how young people lose their religious beliefs as soon as their father’s authority breaks down” [Freud, 1964: 73].

Freud’s formula starts to look inadequate when it is called on to explain a *wave* of scepticism, the kind of mass decline in religious faith that characterised the decadent era. It seems implausible to suppose that millions of individual fathers all over Europe spontaneously lost their authority, thereby provoking this spate of atheism. And what of the *public* factors to which one traditionally ascribes Victorian religious scepticism, such as the scientific discoveries of Lyell and Darwin? Were these matters of pure coincidence? Interestingly enough, Freud himself did not seem to think so: in *The Future of an Illusion*, while celebrating the rise of atheism, he speaks rapturously of how “natural science has shown up the errors [religious documents] contain; comparative research has been struck by the fatal resemblance of the religious conceptions we revere to the mental products of primitive peoples and times” [quoted by Gay, 1988: 533]. *Fatal* resemblance: Freud seems to forget here his own theoretical claim that the death of God proceeds entirely from the atheist’s loss of faith in his own flesh father.¹² Or perhaps one can put that another way: he finds that this thesis is unsustainable in the real world.

Either way, Freud obviously recognised that the era in which he worked was marked by certain scientific advances that had eroded religious faith. This is a more significant concession than Freud might

¹²I say “*his* own father” because it is very hard to see how Freud’s formula can be used to account for atheism, or belief, in females - see the discussion beginning on page 245 below.

think. For when you concede that historical developments are capable of shaping one's faith in God, you surely admit that the same factors can shape one's opinion of one's actual father, of whom God is "nothing other than an exalted" version. You entertain, in other words, the Tolstoyan view that loss of faith in the authority of fathers was an effect, rather than the cause, of the general scepticism of the age.

It is the Tolstoyan view, rather than the Freudian one, which decadent literature tends to substantiate. From the House of Usher to the house of Karamazov, the period's literature is full of families in rampant decay. But that was just one of the many forms of disintegration with which the decadents were obsessed. "Relations," said one of Wilde's characters, advancing the opposite view, "are a sort of aggravated form of the public" [1988: 335]. In other words, a collapse in the authority of the father was only a manifestation of a wider, more public collapse of authority. The revolutions of 1848 had, according to one historian, "undermin[ed] the concept of absolute monarchy and establish[ed] an impetus for liberalism and socialism" [Gildea, 1994]. Ferdinand I, the Habsburg Emperor ousted in that tumultuous year, had spoken of his kingdom as "a worm-eaten house. Take away part of it, and the rest might collapse" [quoted by Zanuso, 1986: 3]. His was far from being the sole political rule of the time to possess this 'worm-eaten' quality. The very concept of authority was being eaten away by thinkers like Hegel, Marx and Darwin, who left structures that had once seemed immutable looking perilous and temporary. In nature and society these thinkers had perceived processes in which newer, robuster forms were continually triumphing over old staid ones. There was something oedipal, in the pre-Freudian sense, about such processes. In the clash between the old thesis and the upstart antithesis, there is a hint of the violent half of the oedipal crime, while in the resolution provided by synthesis one can see

its erotic side. Oscar Wilde, writing in his *College Notebooks*, detected an oedipal pattern in the process by which science supersedes, or in certain cases attempts to ^{effect a} synthesis with, religion:

Primitive religions contain the germ of philosophy and of physical science - unnatural children who seek to annihilate their mother when they have attained to their maturity: yet the intellectual synthesis between religion and science as it is commonly given to us is nothing more than a monstrous¹³ Œdipodean union of vigorous manhood with the effete mother who bare [sic] it - a union whose children must be wanderers and born to evil things.
[Smith & Hefland, 1989: 124]

One interesting thing about these remarks is that Wilde applies the adjective “Œdipodean” only to the “monstrous” cases of synthesis between science and religion, although the term would seem to be just as applicable to those cases in which science, rather than seeking to mate with its parent, kills it instead. Actively resisting this extension of the metaphor, Wilde calls these sciences *children*, their gender unspecified, who seek to annihilate their *mother*. When these children are later figured as male, the oedipal implications of their murder are reduced still further - the murder of a mother by her son is the opposite of oedipal. Moreover, although Wilde calls these murderous children “unnatural”, the logic of the passage suggests that their conduct is only superficially unnatural, and is at bottom actually natural - that the replacement of effete religion by vigorous science is an inevitability, the proper outcome

¹³Interestingly, the word “monstrous” will again crop up in connection with an oedipal theme at the other end of Wilde’s career. In ‘The Ballad of Reading Gaol’, the speaker notes that Justice slays alike the weak, the strong, and “the monstrous parricide!” [Wilde, 1988: 852].

against which the alternative (synthesis) is defined as “monstrous”. In other words, there is a certain natural, inevitable, and perfectly healthy process by which children challenge and assume the authority of their parents. To this process it would be misleading to apply the sensational adjective “oedipal”, with its connotations of perversity. The pre-eminent example of this natural and healthy and inevitable process would appear to be the assumption of a father’s authority by his son.

The Politics of Parricide

“There must always be a struggle between father and son, while one aims at power and the other at independence” [Boswell, 1995: 25]. So said Samuel Johnson, offering what one might broadly call a political, as opposed to an erotic, reading of son-father conflict. There is at least one respect in which this approach is indisputably superior to Freud’s. Freud, by conceiving of the struggle between son and father as a biological inevitability, renders himself incapable of explaining why the intensity of that struggle might fluctuate through time. Faced with the proposition that there was an epidemic of father-hostility during the *fin de siècle*, Freud would probably have to write this “epidemic” off as a fantasy.¹⁴

¹⁴In 1905’s *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud does acknowledge the existence of purely political patterns of authority and rebellion in the family, but takes care to distinguish these from the sexual power-struggle initiated by the Oedipus complex:

Among [infantile] tendencies the first place is taken with uniform frequency by the child’s sexual impulses towards his parents, which are as a rule already differentiated owing to the attraction of the opposite sex - the son being drawn towards his mother and the daughter towards her father. At the same time as these plainly incestuous phantasies are overcome and repudiated, one of the most significant, but also one of the most painful, psychical achievements of the pubertal period is completed: *detachment from parental authority, a process that alone makes possible the opposition, which is so important for the progress of civilization, between the new generation and the old.* At every stage in the course

But by taking Johnson's less stifling perspective, we permit ourselves to embrace, rather than shun, the wealth of evidence that such an epidemic occurred. For Johnson does not privilege the father-son conflict. He sees it as but one manifestation of a broader conflict, the struggle between authority and independence. This broad struggle, while a constant theme of history,¹⁵ is one which can assume varying forms and degrees of ferocity according to local conditions. During the age of the decadence, for example, authority had the worm-eaten quality of which I have spoken above, combined with a tendency towards harshness of enforcement. "After the turmoil of 1848," as one historian says,

of development through which all human beings ought by rights to pass, a certain number are held back; so there are some who have never got over their parents' authority and have withdrawn their affection from them either very incompletely or not at all. They are mostly girls, who, to the delight of their parents, have persisted in all their childish love far beyond puberty. It is most instructive to find that it is precisely these girls who in their later marriage lack the capacity to give their husbands what is due to them; they make cold wives and remain sexually anaesthetic. We learn from this that sexual love and what appears to be non-sexual love for parents are fed from the same sources; the latter, that is to say, merely corresponds to an infantile fixation of the libido. [1974: 93 - emphasis added.]

In other words, Freud concedes that there is such a thing as a *Fathers and Sons*-style opposition between the new generation and the old, and that this opposition is "important for the progress of civilization." But this opposition begins only *after* one becomes detached from parental authority, and that detachment occurs, it seems, only with the repression of the Oedipus complex. Therefore, it would seem, this opposition of the new to the old cannot possibly be confused with the father-hostility that arises for purely sexual reasons during the reign of the Oedipus complex. One is forced to deduce that point, for Freud does not see fit to complicate this passage by introducing the matter of oedipal hostility at all; he speaks of the Oedipus complex as though it consists only of impulses of attraction. But why does parental authority suddenly become an issue when one is detached from it? Why shouldn't we imagine that it was capable of inducing father-resentment in a son, particularly when it was violently enforced? And why does Freud in other places - the Leonardo essay is one - take phenomena which would seem to constitute straightforward examples of this post-oedipal, political opposition between the new and the old, and speak as though they were instances of sexual hostility? Moreover, this passage was written prior to the appearance of the concept of the superego - a concept which, as we shall see, raises fresh questions about the relationship of fatherly authority to the Oedipus complex.

¹⁵"Not to conform to what is established," as Wilde said in his *College Notebooks*, "is merely a synonym for progress" [Smith & Hefland, 1989: 108].

the autocratic regimes of Europe returned to power more than ever determined to retain their position and curb the forces of liberalism. Gradually the concessions granted in the year of revolution were eroded. [Joll, 1970: 72]

At a time when authority possessed these twin hallmarks - oppressiveness, and hollowness - there was bound to be something especially fierce about the struggle for independence. In some strugglers the thirst for independence grew so strong that it could only be slaked by assassination. As Alasdair MacIntyre points out, "[i]n one single period of five years in the late nineteenth century a Czar was killed, two attempts were made on the life of the King of Spain, two on the Kaiser, and one on the King of Italy, and the Chief Secretary for Ireland and his Under-Secretary were killed in Phoenix Park" [Macintyre, 1970: 59]. One can see why the father-son struggle, if it is always a part of general politics, might have taken on a parricidal edge at a time like this.

Edmund Gosse, in his 1907 memoir *Father and Son*, offers plenty of material in support of this historical view. Recounting the epic antagonism between his younger self and his fundamentalist father, Gosse is careful to stress that their antipathy was nothing personal. It was inspired by forces which lay beyond both of them. "This book is the record of a struggle between two temperaments, two consciences and almost two epochs," Gosse's work begins.

It ended, as was inevitable, in disruption. Of the two human beings here described, one was born to fly backward, the other could not help being carried forward. There came a time when neither spoke the same language as the other, or encompassed the same hopes, or was fortified by the same desires. But, at least, it is

some consolation to the survivor, that neither, to the very last hour, ceased to respect the other, or to regard him with a sad indulgence.

The affection of these persons was assailed by forces in comparison with which the changes that health or fortune or place introduce are as nothing. [Gosse, 1973: 7 - emphasis added.]

Even when a writer is not so forthcoming about the social dimension of the parricidal theme, the link can usually be found without much effort. Take Wilde's claim that "in literature, one must always kill one's father." This looks spectacularly oedipal on its own, but really one must read it in context, as the utterance of a man whose work was dominated by the theme of irresponsibility. This is the man who affirmed, in 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism', that "Disobedience, in the eyes of one who has read history, is man's original virtue. It is through disobedience that progress has been made, through disobedience and through rebellion" [1970c: 231]. Occasionally, as in the example of the Flaubert remark, Wilde pursued this theme of disobedience into the sphere of the father-son relationship. But generally he deployed it in manifestly political contexts, where one can clearly see that the theme had no *essential* connection with fathers and sons. Wilde's servant characters, for example, tend to evince an outrageous disrespect for authority. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Jack's servants openly pilfer his champagne. When the powerless master tentatively asks his butler Lane for an explanation ("I ask merely for information," he stresses), the insolent flunkey replies: "I attribute it to the superior quality of the wine, sir" [Wilde, 1988: 321]. Nor is the servant of Dorian Gray to be trusted - "There was something sly about him, and he had thoughtful, treacherous eyes" [1988: 97]. The link between the unreliability of

servants and the insubordination of children is visible when Lady Bracknell suppresses the elopement of her daughter, having been "Apprised, sir, of my daughter's sudden flight by her trusty maid, whose confidence I purchased by means of a small coin..." [372]. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, the parricide Smerdyakov is the victim's servant as well as his son.¹⁶

These fictional hints about the political dimension of family affairs were fleshed out, as it were, by the serious political theory of the time. Marx viewed the family as a key venue of oppression and decay, and therefore a suitable site for revolution. In *Capital* he writes of "the dissolution, under the capitalist system, of old family ties" [Bekerman, 1983: 63]. Engels made an expanded version of the same point in *The Condition of the Working Class* (1845): "If the family of our present society is being ... dissolved, this dissolution merely shows that, at bottom, the binding tie of this family was not family affection, but private interest lurking under the cloak of a pretended community of possessions" [Bekerman, 1983: 61-62].¹⁷

In *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), it is made clear that this dissolution, accompanied as it is by parental oppression, justifies a violent response:

Abolition of the family! Even the most radical flare up at this infamous proposal of the Communists.

¹⁶Cf. *A Tale of Two Cities*: "They even whisper that because he has slain Monseigneur, and because Monseigneur was the father of his tenants - serfs - what you will - he will be executed as a parricide" [Dickens, 1993: 258-259].

The connection between parricide and the unreliability of servants can be traced right back to the Oedipus myth itself. When the oracle prophesies that the baby Oedipus will grow to kill his father, Laius decides to get in first by killing the child. He delegates the deed to a lackey, who does not have the heart to go through with it. By letting the child live, the disobedient servant effectively acts as an accomplice to the parricide of his master.

¹⁷Engels would later devote a full study to these issues: *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, first published in 1884.

On what foundation is the present family, the bourgeois family, based? On capital, on private gain....

Do you charge us with wanting to stop the exploitation of children by their parents? To this crime we plead guilty....

The bourgeois clap-trap about the family and education, about the hallowed co-relation of parent and child, becomes all the more disgusting, the more, by the action of Modern Industry, all family ties among the proletarians are torn asunder, and their children transformed into simple articles of commerce and instruments of labour. [Marx and Engels, 1967: 100-101]

The impulse to parricide was therefore, if Marx is to be believed, a political impulse.¹⁸ To kill one's father was to enact the shifting power relations of the time. Like revolution, parricide is simply the hastening of a process which is inevitable anyway, according to the dialectic. So the crumbling of the father's authority is already a kind of slow-motion parricide in itself. Parricide is implicit in decay.

¹⁸In *The Law of Civilization and Decay*, first published in 1895, the American historian Brooks Adams proposed that the disintegrative trends of his own age were governed by a general law of decay discernible throughout history, and argued that the decline of the nuclear family was a function of advanced capitalism: "If, then, although nature never precisely repeats itself, she operates upon the human mind according to immutable laws, it should be possible by comparing a living civilization with a dead, to estimate in some degree the course which has been run. For such an attempt an infinite variety of standards might be suggested, but few, perhaps, are more suitable than the domestic relations which lie at the basis of the reproduction of life.

"In a martial and imaginative age, where energy vents itself through fear, and every man must be a soldier, the family generally forms a unit; the women and children being under the control of the father, as they were under the control of the Patriarchs in the Bible, or of the paterfamilias in Rome.... As the pressure of economic competition intensifies with social consolidation, the family regularly disintegrates, *the children rejecting the parental authority at a steadily decreasing age*; until, finally, the population fuses into a compact mass, in which all individuals are equal before the law, and all are forced to compete with each other for the means of subsistence. When at length wealth has accumulated sufficiently to find vent through capitalistic methods of farming and manufacture, children lose all value, for then hiring labour is always cheaper than breeding. Thenceforward, among the more extravagant races, the family dwindles, as in ancient Rome or modern France..." [Adams, 1943: 336, 338-339 - emphasis added].

It might seem curious to cite Marx in connection with themes in decadent fiction. Yet it is a measure of how stifling and untenable the Victorian power structure had become that even Oscar Wilde, of all people, deemed himself a socialist. Not, of course, that 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism' (1890) represents a serious contribution to leftist discourse. Wilde's essay is thoroughly unconcerned with what a just mode of social organisation might look like. Wilde's stance is one of pure opposition: he is against all authority, authority as such. "[A]uthority is quite degrading", he explains. "It degrades those who exercise it, and it degrades those over whom it is exercised. When it is violently, grossly and cruelly used, it produces a good effect, by creating, or at any rate bringing out, the spirit of revolt and Individualism that is to kill it" [1970c: 242].¹⁹ Individualism, the freedom from all external constraint, is Wilde's political ideal.²⁰ He longs for an apolitical future; but so long as the present abuse of authority persists, he will be as political as Marx. He insists, as Marx and Engels do, that authority contains its own undoing, that oppression will provoke an equal but opposite reaction from the oppressed. This principle applies not only to the politics of government, but also, we find out later in the essay, to the politics of journalism (and presumably to any agency that abuses its authority). "Fortunately, in America, journalism has carried its authority to the grossest and most brutal extreme. *As a natural consequence* it has begun to create a spirit of revolt" [255 - emphasis added].

If this formula of Wilde's is right, then the parricidal leanings of his generation might be explained as a natural consequence of another

¹⁹See also Wilde's essay 'A Chinese Sage': "All modes of government are wrong ... they are immoral because, by interfering with the individual, they produce the most aggressive forms of egotism ... *they are self-destructive, because they engender anarchy*" [289 - italics added].

²⁰Nietzsche's concept of the 'will to power' represents a similarly self-centred politics. For the concept, Nietzsche explained, was nothing more than a synonym for "the *instinct for freedom*" [See Nietzsche, 1989: 87, and Kaufmann, 1950: 215].

contemporary phenomenon - the grossness and brutality with which Victorian fathers wielded their authority. But how can we establish that the authority of the Victorian father answered this description? We could point to instance after instance of bad fathering without establishing that this was a general phenomenon: pointing to a lot of black swans does not confirm the proposition that all swans are black. What we must do is consider the structural characteristics of the Victorian family, and the ways in which this structure fostered hostility to the father.²¹

To put it another way, we must attend to the fact that the bourgeois Victorian family, the foundation on which Freud built so many of his central hypotheses, had an acutely patriarchal structure.²² In certain contexts, ones in which it suited him to do so, Freud demonstrated an awareness of this elementary but crucial point.²³ His theory of the

²¹A point at which Henri Ellenberger hints in his book *The Discovery of the Unconscious*, in the section entitled "The World in 1880":

There was a strong emphasis on male domination.... Man's authority over his children and also over his wife was unquestioned. Education was authoritarian; the despotic father was a common figure and was particularly conspicuous only when he became extremely cruel. Conflicts between generations, particularly between fathers and sons, were more frequent than today. But authoritarianism was a feature of the times and reigned everywhere, not only in the family. The military, magistrates and judges enjoyed great prestige. Laws were more repressive, delinquent youth sternly punished, and corporal punishment was considered indispensable. All this must be considered with regard to the genesis of Freud's Oedipus complex. [Ellenberger, 1970: 255]

²²In Feminist theory, the relationship between psychoanalysis and patriarchy has been dealt with in a variety of ways, as Margaret Whitford points out in *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary*. "Psychoanalysis," Whitford explains, "had originally been seen by Kate Millet [in *Sexual Politics* (1969)] as a version of patriarchal ideology" [Whitford, 1992: 301]. But a later wave of feminists engaged in a "re-consideration of psychoanalysis ... [which] came about largely through Lacan's re-reading of Freud", and treated Freudian theory "as a feminist resource" [302]. Juliet Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974) is an important contribution to this second tradition. "[T]he argument of this book," Mitchell writes in her introduction, "is that a rejection of psychoanalysis and of Freud's works is fatal for feminism. However it may have been used, psychoanalysis is not a recommendation for a patriarchal society, but an analysis of one. If we are interested in understanding and challenging the oppression of women, we cannot afford to neglect it" [Mitchell, 1974: xv].

²³In *Totem and Taboo*, for example, when Freud is speculatively tracing the evolution of civilization to an act of parricide in the outrageously patriarchal primal horde, he

Oedipus complex, though, seems to ignore the fact of patriarchy, locating the child in a cultural and political vacuum, in which the distinction between its mother and its father is very largely, if not wholly, a matter of biology. In the real world, however, the genital differences which were of such prime significance to Freud were scrupulously concealed under silk and serge;²⁴ it was the discrepancy of power between parents that was far

admits that civilized society, and the families which constitute it, retain that sexist structure: "With the introduction of father-deities a fatherless society gradually changed into one organised on a patriarchal basis. The family was a restoration of the former primal horde and it gave back to fathers a large portion of their former rights" [SE, 13: 149].

²⁴As proof of this point, it is instructive to consider Freud's own childhood experience. Writing to Fliess on October 3, 1897, a mere twelve days before he announces the theory of the Oedipus complex, he says: "For the last four days my self-analysis ... has presented me with the most valuable elucidations and clues.... [I]n my case ... my libido towards *matrem* was awakened ... on the occasion of a [train] journey with her from Leipzig to Vienna, during which we must have spent the night together and there must have been an opportunity of seeing her *nudam* (you inferred the consequences of this for your son long ago, as a remark revealed to me)..." [Masson, 1985: 268]. We have here a strong implication that the young Freud only ever saw his mother naked on one occasion, thanks to the extraordinary opportunity provided by an overnight train trip. Freud does not seem to think that once is an inordinately low number of times to see one's mother in the nude - indeed his self-analysis depended on the assumption that his own experiences were more or less typical, and in this respect one has no reason to doubt that the assumption was valid. But to see one's mother naked only once is to come perilously close to missing out on the spectacle altogether - if the Freuds had been late for that train, Sigmund would presumably never have made the optical acquaintance of his mother's body. Oedipal theory, however, seems to assume that no child will ever miss out on the sight - how else, apart from seeing them naked, can a child become aware of the sexual difference between its parents, or make those discoveries about the relation of their respective genders to its own which are supposed to have such a decisive influence on psychological development? On the basis of what Freud's letter inadvertently tells us about the drought of parental nudity suffered by the Victorian child, it would seem impossible to believe that such sexual discoveries were invariably made. (A similar problem surrounds the importance that Freud ascribes to the child's observation of parental coitus. "[A]nalysis," Freud says on this issue, "shows us in a shadowy way how the fact of a child at a very early age listening to its parents copulating may set up his first sexual excitation, and how that event may, owing to its after-effects, act as a starting-point for the child's whole sexual development.... It is impossible, however," Freud concedes, "to suppose that these observations of coitus are of universal occurrence, so that at this point we are faced with the problem of 'primal phantasies'" [1950a: 189]. But if a child does *not* witness such a scene, then where does it get the material to construct a fantasised version of it? How does it know what to fantasise? And if a child's "whole sexual development" does not begin until it witnesses this scene, then what *motivates* the primal fantasy of the child who has not seen it?)

On the other hand, imagine a culture in which children are constantly exposed to the sight of their unclothed parents: under such conditions, parental nudity would surely lack the monumental and enduring psychological significance that it had for Sigmund Freud, for whom the sight was as rare as gold. This is another reminder of how quintessentially Victorian was Freud's insistence on the importance of sexuality, and of

more rudely on show. Surely that discrepancy alone was enough to generate a marked fear of the father, or even a hostility to him. Surely, in other words, the structure of the patriarchal family imparted to fathers *in general* that grossness of authority which Wilde defined as the wellspring of the revolutionary spirit. In order to be oppressive, the patriarch did not have to maltreat his children, or his wife, in any active way. Fatherly oppression - in the sense of a radical power imbalance in the father's favour - was systematically inscribed in family relations. Is it not probable, indeed inevitable, that children should have reproduced that distortion in their affections, by preferring their mothers to their fathers? Edmund Burke was one pre-Freudian writer who thought so: back in 1757, in his *Philosophical Enquiry*, Burke wrote: "The authority of a father, so useful to our well-being, and so justly venerable on all accounts, hinders us from having that entire love for him that we have for our mothers, where the parental authority is almost melted down into the mother's fondness and indulgence" [Burke, 1990: 101]. The Freudian who reads this as an expression of Burke's Oedipus complex is missing the point. Burke's words give us a good reason to suspect that the Oedipus complex is an illusion. The Freudian is obliged to *prove*, rather than merely to assert, its reality.

The word *patriarchy* refers to the structure of more than just the family, of course. The patriarchal family was the kernel of a patriarchal society. The conflation of authority and maleness that we find in the Victorian family was generally present throughout institutions, government, the law. In this sense, there was quite literally a continuity

the possibility that if the psyches of his contemporaries were dominated by sexuality, that was because their bodies were rigorously and unnaturally denied it. A victim of starvation will presumably be obsessed by the subject of food, but that does not demonstrate that a desire to eat is the universal driving force behind all mental activities and products. (On this point, consider Freud's description of the food dreams experienced by the hungry in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in the chapter entitled 'Dreams as Wish-Fulfillment'.)

between rebellion within the family and rebellion beyond it. To challenge society was to challenge the authority of one's father, and vice-versa. The Lear-like protagonist of Balzac's *Père Goriot* (1834) recognises as much. "The country will go to ruin if the fathers are trampled underfoot," he says. "The thing is clear as day. Society, the whole world, turns on fatherly love; everything falls to pieces if children do not love their fathers" [Balzac, 1988: 286].²⁵ These words, written at the dawn of the decadent era, read like a prophecy of the impending state of affairs, when a lack of love for social institutions and a lack of love for fathers went hand in hand.

How deeply did the patriarchal system shape the theory of the Oedipus complex? At the very least, Freud participated in the sexism of his epoch by taking the male's complex as the central one, the only one worthy of a name.²⁶ But Freud's gaze, as we shall see, was even more narrowly sexist than that - for not only did he take the male as his paradigmatic subject, he devoted the bulk of his attention to that half of the male's complex which related to his *male* parent. Hence we have the curious paradox that a theory which proposes the immense significance of infantile sexuality ends up concerning itself, when it comes to such practical matters as engaging with actual data, with the hostile relationship between two males. This male-centred perspective may well have originated as a relatively innocent function of Freud's sexism, but it raises profound questions about the validity of Freud's theory. For we have already seen evidence, and during the course of this chapter we will be seeing plenty more, that the kind of father-son struggle that so excited Freud, and which formed a disproportionately large chunk of his

²⁵Goriot utters these words on his deathbed. During the same speech, he urges: "Ah! my friend, do not marry; do not have children! You give them life; they give you death in return. You bring them into the world, and they push you from it" [Balzac, 1988: 284].

²⁶See note 2 above.

evidence that the Oedipus complex existed, was a struggle so contaminated by political factors that it is misleading to read it as purely sexual. And that is to put it as charitably to Freud as the facts allow. To put it less kindly, Freud's contention that there was such a thing as the Oedipus complex, in so far as it had any empirical basis at all, was founded on contemporary cases of father-hostility like the Rat Man's, or Little Hans's, or even Dostoevsky's - hostilities which were quite conceivably *purely* political. In short, the extent to which Freud's data were poisoned by patriarchy gives us very good reason to wonder whether the Oedipus complex exists at all.

One way of distinguishing between "oedipal" resentment of the father, if it exists at all, and political resentment of the patriarch, is that the latter form of resentment is not exclusive to sons. Patriarchy saw to it that "*wife and children*," as Marx and Engels bluntly put it in *The German Ideology*, "are the slaves of the husband" [quoted by Bekerman: 62 - emphasis added]. We would therefore expect to find that the patriarch was resented by his wife and by his daughters as well as his sons. If we can unearth instances of such resentment, the effect will be to desexualise, either partially or fully, the Victorian son's hostility to his father.

War and Peace offers the following instance of parricidal wishes on the part of a daughter. As old Bolkonsky lies dying, his daughter Maria reflects:

She went over their lives together, and in every word of his, every action, found a manifestation of his love for her. Occasionally these recollections were interrupted by those promptings of the devil, the thoughts of what would happen after his death, and how she would arrange her new life of freedom. But she drove away

such imaginings with loathing.... She woke late. The clear-sightedness which often accompanies the moment of waking showed her unmistakably what it was that was of most interest to her in her father's illness. She woke, listened to what was going on behind the door and, hearing him groan, said to herself with a sigh that things were still the same.

'But what change could there be? What did I hope for? I hope for his death!' she cried, revolted with herself. [Tolstoy, 1973: 849]²⁷

What about fiction in which the patriarch is wished dead by his wife? In George Egerton's²⁸ story 'Virgin Soil', published in her 1894 volume *Discords*, a young woman reproaches her mother with having made her enter, at the age of eighteen, an arranged marriage. She speaks of

the loathing horror that has made my married life a nightmare to me - ay, made me a murderess in heart over and over again.

This is not exaggeration.... He has stood on his rights; but do you think, if I had known, that I would have given such insane obedience, from a mistaken sense of duty, as would lead to this? I have my rights too, and my duty to myself.... I loathe him,

²⁷It is true of course that Maria is a fictional female created by a man. But that point is detrimental to my case only if you can bring yourself to believe that no real female ever felt the way that Tolstoy has Maria feel here - i.e. that the scene rendered by Tolstoy could not possibly have occurred in real life.

Another point at which *War and Peace* illustrates the principle that a patriarch can be wished dead by people other than his son, for reasons other than sexual jealousy, comes when Anna Mihalovna reflects on the case of the ageing Count Bezuhov: "I often think," said the princess [Anna Mihalovna], "maybe it's a sin but I often think: There's Count Kirill Vladimirovich Bezuhov all alone ... that enormous fortune ... and what is he living for? Life's a burden to him, while Bory's [i.e. Boris, her son and the Count's godson] life is just beginning" [Tolstoy, 1973: 54].

²⁸George Egerton was the pen-name of the Australian-born decadent Mary Chavelita Dunne.

shiver at the touch of his lips, his breath, his hands;... my whole body revolts at his touch;... when he has turned and gone to sleep, I have watched him with such growing hatred that at times the temptation to kill him has been so strong that I have crept out of bed and walked the cold passage in my bare feet until I was too benumbed to feel anything.... [Egerton, 1983: 159-160]

Imagine if this murderous impulse had been confessed to by the patriarch's son: imagine the smile that would bring to the face of the Freudian. But as it is the Freudian can only wince, for Egerton has confirmed that the patriarch could induce in the victims of his oppression - a category which obviously includes his sons - a violent *political* resentment of him. This striking fictional case of what might be called husband-hostility becomes all the more significant when Egerton's character goes on to identify this as a common complaint, a structural problem: "She feels ... as if all the needs of protesting women of whom she has read with a vague displeasure have come home to her" [161].

Kate Chopin's 'The Story of an Hour' (1894) is another story in which a wife's husband-hostility attains the intensity of a death-wish. An un-named woman is informed of the death of her husband. (It later emerges that the death has not really occurred, but in the present context that is immaterial). The widow weeps briefly, but then begins to reflect - well within the hour, as the title suggests - on the positive side of her husband's premature demise.

[S]he saw ... a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely. And she opened and spread her arms to them in welcome.

There would be no one to live for during those coming years: she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose on a fellow-creature. A kind intention or a cruel intention made the act seem no less a crime as she looked upon it in that brief moment of illumination.

And yet she had loved him - sometimes. Often she had not. What did it matter! What could love, the unsolved mystery, count for in the face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognised as the strongest impulse of her being.²⁹

'Free! Body and soul free!' she kept whispering. [Chopin, 1986: 214-215]

Like Egerton, Chopin gives us just the confirmation we want of the generality of this phenomenon. For we are explicitly informed that the husband in this case was not *especially* objectionable - "she had loved him - sometimes", and he, for his part, "had never looked save with love on her." [215; 214] But what did *that* matter! Whether the patriarch has kind or cruel intentions is neither here nor there: what matters is the cruelty of the structure, that crushing of the wife's drive to self-assertion which is inherent in the institution of marriage, such as it then was.

Elaine Showalter, in a fascinating essay,³⁰ has documented the curious prevalence of husband-hostility among British wives of the time. While some young women mourned the death of Queen Victoria's husband, Showalter explains, others

²⁹In connection with this idea that self-assertion is one's strongest impulse, see Nietzsche's definition of the Will to Power, in note 20 above.

³⁰'Family Secrets and Domestic Subversion: Rebellion in the Novels of the 1860s' in *The Victorian Family: Structure and Stresses*, ed. A. Wohl.

were lining up at Mudie's Select Circulating Library to demand quite another sort of family chronicle. In the sensational bestsellers of the 1860s, such as the *Bigamy Novels* of Mary E. Braddon, Mrs Henry Wood's *East Lynne*, and Rhoda Broughton's *Cometh Up as a Flower*, readers enjoyed fantasies which countered the official mythology of the Albert Memorial. In these novels, the death of a husband comes as a welcome release and wives who lack the friendly agency of typhoid seek desperate remedies in flight, adultery, divorce and ultimately murder. As a critic reviewing sensation fiction for the *Westminster Review* in 1864 noted, with characteristic cautious reserve, 'The institution of marriage might almost seem to be ... just now upon its trial.'

Sensation fiction appearing in the first decade after the Matrimonial Causes Act (1857)³¹ certainly seems to be recording a new kind of family pattern. It portrays an unhappy marriage as a cage rather than a spiritual opportunity.... Stories of domestic murder struck a note of uncomfortable psychological authenticity, one assumes from critical reactions, clerical panic, rumours, jokes, and legal action centering on the possibility of widespread female homicide.... While the actual number of women executed for murder in England between 1830 and 1874 was not very great, forty percent of them had indeed killed their husbands. By 1868, public concern over the availability of the preferred female weapon, arsenic, led to its control in the Sale of Poisons Bill. [Showalter, 1978: 101]

³¹"The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857," Showalter explains, "still limited women's rights to obtain a divorce, making it possible for a husband to petition on the grounds of adultery, while the wife had to prove desertion, cruelty, incest, rape, sodomy or bestiality. But at least the Act recognized that the Victorian home so rapturously celebrated in theory could, in reality, be a prison or a madhouse" [Showalter, 1978: 106-107].

Husband-hostility, then, was a real enough phenomenon of the Victorian age. It manifested itself not only in murderous impulses, but in murderous acts. It would be superfluous to seek the roots of this hostility in some obscure psychological complex. Every action produces an equal and opposite reaction, and hostility to the husband is precisely the reaction one would expect to oppression of the wife. The political nature of husband-hostility is crystal clear, and it seems more than fair to entertain the possibility that the simultaneous rash of father-hostility might have been equally political.

Take the following passage from Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*:

The feeling with which he thought of his dead father was almost exclusively that of awe; though crossed at times by a not unpleasant sense of liberty, as he could but confess to himself, pondering, in the actual absence of so weighty and continual a restraint, upon the *arbitrary power which Roman religion and Roman law gave to the parent over the son....*" [Pater, 1921: 16 - emphasis added]

When looked at alongside the husband-hostility described by Showalter, this passage sheds its "oedipal" connotations, and its political essence is revealed. Compare the "not unpleasant sense of liberty" Marius feels over the death of his father with the "welcome release" that attended, for the fictional heroines mentioned by Showalter, the death of the husband. But we shouldn't need to adduce the corresponding sentiments of Victorian wives in order to illuminate the political nature of Marius's feelings. Pater specifically tells us that we are in the field of power relations. In the authority of his Roman father Marius detects precisely

the two key qualities that the decadents found so objectionable about authority in their age: it was arbitrary, and it was oppressive. Moreover, the substitution of the word 'parent' for the word 'father' in the final phrase demonstrates the power of patriarchy, and the patriarchy of power: when the parental agency was considered in terms of its restrictive function, 'parent' and 'father' became synonyms.

The neurotic Des Esseintes is similarly alienated from his parents, especially from his father:

There was no gratitude or affection associated with the memories he retained of his parents: only fear. His father, who normally resided in Paris, was almost a complete stranger; and he remembered his mother chiefly as a still, supine figure in a darkened bedroom in the Château de Lourps. It was only rarely that husband and wife met, and all that he could recall of these occasions was a drab impression of his parents sitting facing each other over a table that was lighted only by a deeply shaded lamp, for the Duchess had a nervous attack whenever she was subjected to light or noise. In the semi-darkness they would exchange one or two words at the most, and then the Duke would unconcernedly slip away to catch the first available train.

His family showed little interest in his doings. Occasionally his father would come to see him at school, but all he had to say was: 'Good day, goodbye, be good, and work hard.' [Huysmans, 1987: 18-19]

There are several ways in which this passage resists a Freudian reading. For one thing, there is nothing uniquely privileged about Des Esseintes's fear of his father. He fears both his parents. If he fears his

father *more* than his mother, that is only because his father is an even more repellent embodiment than she is of the parental agency's cold authoritarianism. Des Esseintes is an outlandish character, but his relationship with his parents cannot, alas, be deemed wholly unrepresentative. Freud himself confirmed, in a paper written in 1898,³² that grotesque aloofness was a common, and harmful, feature of contemporary fathering. "The increase in neurasthenia," he declares, "may quite rightly be accounted to our civilization. There is a great deal which must be changed." Among the required changes: "the pride of fathers who are unwilling to descend to the level of common humanity in the eyes of their children will have to be overcome" [1950e: 239]. So at a very early stage Freud knew perfectly well that society made fathers play a lofty, inhumane role, and that this amounted to a form of oppression which could have nasty consequences, such as the production of nervous illness in children of either sex. Again, it does not seem at all unreasonable to suggest that the same structural problem might have been responsible for a child's *fear* of the father, or *resentment* of him, or even for feelings which might be considered parricidal. In other words, it seems perfectly conceivable that a Victorian child might have disliked its father because of the content of his character, rather than the contents of his trousers.

We can observe the patriarch in action by returning to the case of Tolstoy - who, we will recall, detected among his children a certain disregard for his authority. If we read further through his *Diaries* we will find that Tolstoy inadvertently explains that disregard, by furnishing us with ample evidence of his participation in patriarchal oppression. It is

³²'Sexuality in the Aetiology of the Neuroses' [Freud, 1950e].

interesting, for example, that in Tolstoy's mind his wife did not seem to differ in status from his children. They all belonged together on the same plane: that of servility. He speaks of "my unhappy family: my wife, sons and daughters who live side by side with me and deliberately put barriers between me and themselves in order not to see the truth and the good, which would expose the falseness of their lives..." [198]. Above them all, on the plane of authority, towered the father. In Tolstoy's case, this power relation was reified by chronological seniority: he was sixteen years older than his wife. (Freud's father, interestingly enough, towered over his wife by *twenty* years.)³³

How did Tolstoy's style of fathering feel from the receiving end? His son Ilya wrote:

In all my life my father never once caressed me ... he never expressed his love in any overt, spontaneous way and always seemed to be afraid of such spontaneous demonstrations of affection. In our childhood every expression of affection was called 'sloppy sentimentality' He never sympathised, never expressed affection. If we wanted sympathy or felt like howling we ran to *maman*. She applied a compress, then petted and consoled us. [I. Tolstoy, 1971: 40]

Whatever his eccentricities in other regards, Tolstoy was in this respect perhaps not atypical. The fathering style of one Sigmund Freud, for example, squared with Tolstoy's. According to Peter Gay:

³³Writing about Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, Harold Bloom calls the character of Mr Ramsay "a last Victorian who is more of a grandfather than a father to his children" [Bloom, 1995: 440]. This nice formulation refers to the style of Victorian fathering, but not infrequently one finds, as in the cases of Jacob Freud and Leo Tolstoy, that the grandfather-like father was of an appropriately grandfatherly age.

As a bourgeois of his time and his northern culture, Freud was not very demonstrative. He was, his nephew Harry remembered, 'always on very friendly terms with his children' but not 'expansive'; rather, he was 'always a bit formal and reserved.' Indeed, 'it rarely happened that he kissed any of them; I might almost say, really never....' [Gay, 1988: 162]

There is a further curious respect in which Freud's and Tolstoy's practice as fathers coincided. Having described Freud's frostiness toward his sons, Gay adds: "It is likely that what he withheld from his boys he gladly gave to his girls; on one of his visits, [Ernest] Jones saw a Freud daughter, 'then a big schoolgirl, cuddling on his lap'" [Gay, 1988: 162]. Tolstoy's frostiness, too, thawed somewhat in the presence of his daughters. Ilya Tolstoy notes of his sister Masha:

Sometimes she would go to him quite simply, as to a beloved elderly father, and stroke his hand or caress him, and he accepted this affection and returned it with like simplicity.

For some reason it was not the same with us, his sons.
[Tolstoy, 1971: 40]³⁴

An era in which it was acceptable for a father to dish out affection to his daughters while withholding from his sons provides, to say the least, a wonky foundation for a theory which regards the imbalance of a child's feelings for its parents as an expression of its sexual desires. If Ilya Tolstoy preferred his mother to his father, isn't it possible that this preference was wholly conditioned by his upbringing? If so, it would be

³⁴Cf. the parenting style of Oblonsky in *Anna Karenin*: "He was conscious that he did not care as much for [his] boy as for [his] girl and did his best to treat the children alike; but the boy felt this and did not respond to his father's cold smile" [Tolstoy, 1981: 20].

cheating to use cases like Ilya's to support the contention that all sons, irrespective of their cultural situation, love their mothers and resent their fathers. Were the emotions which Freud attributed to child sexuality really the product of adult sexism?

One might have expected decadent literature to play into Freud's hands on this question. The decadents, after all, were radical individualists, and therefore unlikely to admit that their precious private emotions might have been installed in them by society. Curiously enough, though, when the decadents dealt with feelings that we might call parricidal, they were unusually frank about the cultural context of these impulses. Consider this exchange from *The Importance of Being Earnest*:

ALGERNON: My dear boy, I love hearing my relations abused. It is the only thing that makes me put up with them at all. Relations are simply a tedious pack of people, who haven't got the remotest knowledge of how to live, nor the smallest instinct about when to die.

JACK: Ah! I haven't got any relations. Don't know anything about relations.

ALGERNON: You are a lucky fellow. Relations never lend one any money, and won't give one credit, even for genius. They are a sort of aggravated form of the public.

JACK: And after all, what does it matter whether a man ever had a father and mother or not? Mothers, of course, are all right. They pay a chap's bills and don't bother him. But fathers bother a chap and never pay his bills. I don't know a single chap at the club who speaks to his father.

ALGERNON: Yes! Fathers are certainly not popular just at present. [Wilde, 1988: 335]

Is this discussion merely a rationalisation of Oscar Wilde's carnally-generated hatred of his father? If so, it is a remarkably intricate one, with a lot of irrelevancies in its superstructure. That point does not necessarily count against Freud, of course: the unconscious is supposed to be ingenious in its secondary revisions. But what does count against Freud is the fact that all of these "irrelevancies" happen to be highly relevant to an alternative thesis, namely the proposition that there was a form of father-hostility peculiar to the *fin de siècle*. The most telling piece of evidence for this historical reading is the final line: "fathers are certainly not popular *just at present*". And leading up to it we have several strong indications of just what it was about that historical moment that had rendered fathers so unpopular. The phrase about relations (and by strong implication fathers) having not "the smallest instinct of when to die" is effectively historicised by the preceding allegation that they "haven't got the remotest knowledge of how to live." This line, it seems to me, alludes to the width of the decadent generation gap. To a dandy like Algernon, or Jack, or Wilde, well-versed in the latest philosophies of moral scepticism, and enacting them through such frivolous pursuits as Bunburying, how *old* those Victorian fathers must have looked, how stale, how remote. They simply didn't know how to *live*, in the italicised way that the dandy did. And by having not the smallest instinct of when to die, they echoed the stubbornness of all those other decrepit Victorian institutions that had had their day.

Then there are the financial factors Wilde mentions - income, credit, the payment and non-payment of bills. With such economic themes in mind, we can improve our understanding of the complaint

about relations having “not the smallest instinct of *when* to die”. When their sons need money is when fathers ought to die. At least the sons, unlike the abject old men, will think of an appropriately hedonistic way to spend it. This idea is expressed even more sharply by a character in *Vera* (1880), Wilde’s first play:

I have been an eldest son myself. I know what it is when a father won’t die to please one. [Wilde, 1995: 541]

Thanks to the principle of patrilineal inheritance, an eldest son in particular had an economic reason to desire the death of his father. But it would be naive to think that this economic motive was held exclusively by the *eldest* son. It would also be a mistake to think of it as purely economic. For in light of what we know about patriarchy, we cannot fail to see that the sexist way it distributed money was emblematic of the sexist way it distributed power. The principle by which the eldest son enjoyed financial inheritance did not come out of the blue: it was an extension of the deep structural privileging of the male in general. The heir’s monetary gain was only a token of the far deeper kind of profit he stood to derive from the death of his father: namely, succession to a station of absolute authority. As far as questions of power were concerned, all male children, not just the eldest, stood to gain from the death of the father. First, there was a negative gain: a relaxation of the filial oppression of which they, as sons, had felt the brunt. Then there was a more positive reward: graduation to the role of participant in patriarchy, beneficiary of it. All that money does, then, is bring patriarchy’s latent incitement to parricide vulgarly out into the open.

The Beating of the Rat Man

Interestingly enough, the connection between money and parricide is made, fleetingly, in Freud's 'Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis' (1909), otherwise known as the case of the 'Rat Man':

six months before his father's death ... he [i.e. the Rat Man] had already been in love with his lady, but financial obstacles made it impossible to think of an alliance with her. The idea had then occurred to him that *his father's death might make him rich enough to marry her* ³⁵.... [T]hese thoughts surprised him very much, for he was quite certain that his father's death could never have been an object of his desire but only of his fear. [Freud, 1991a: 60 - the italics are Freud's.]

Needless to say, Freud does not think of these financial factors as fundamentally important. He insists on the *sexual* character of the Rat Man's parricidal leanings, and presents the case as a more or less classical illustration of the Oedipus complex and its role in the formation of neuroses. It is true that Freud does report incidents from the Rat Man's life which support this sexual hypothesis. But it is equally true that along the way he drops several morsels of data which severely undermine his reading.

The meatiest of these morsels is this one:

When he was very small [i.e. between three and four years old] ... he [i.e. The Rat Man] had done something naughty, for which his

³⁵One can remind oneself of the non-oedipal nature of this idea by remembering that a money-hungry *daughter* can conceive an identical parricidal wish, as in the passage from *War and Peace* quoted on page 211 above.

father had given him a beating. The little boy had flown into a terrible rage and had hurled abuse at his father even while he was under his blows. But as he knew no bad language, he had called him all the names of common objects that he could think of, and had screamed: 'You lamp! You towel! You plate!' and so on. His father, shaken by an outburst of such elemental fury, had stopped beating him, and had declared: 'The child will either be a great man or a great criminal!' [85-86]

"These alternatives did not exhaust the possibilities," Freud adds in a footnote. "His father had overlooked the commonest outcome of such premature passions - a neurosis" [86n].

Almost a century later, there is something sickening about the casualness with which Freud accepts the violent beating of a three-year-old boy. These days such an assault would make a father a pariah, if not a prisoner. But to Freud, as indeed to the Rat Man's father, the beating itself is a mere part of the landscape. The whole point of the story lies in the child's response, his "premature passions". The only remarkable thing about the episode is that a three-year old should respond to a beating in any other fashion than to lie there and take it.

But instead the poor child seems to resent the beating, and this resentment must *mean* something. To the father - so flabbergasted that he calls a premature halt to the attack - it means that the boy will be either a great man or a great criminal.³⁶ To Freud, the child's outburst

³⁶Incidentally, if the resistance of the great man cannot be distinguished from that of the criminal, then the system against which they are rebelling must be in rotten condition. By speaking of both forms of resistance in the same breath, the Rat Man's father seems tacitly to concede this point. Moreover, he seems to acknowledge, at an unconscious level of course, that the patriarchal violence of which he is such a vigorous practitioner has something to do with this rottenness. The law of the patriarch is so unjust that the resister of it is simultaneously a criminal and a great man. The life of Oscar Wilde bears this notion out. So does his work at certain points: consider his definition of disobedience as "man's original virtue", and his frequent flirtation (in the essay 'Pen, Pencil and

vindicates a hypothesis at which he had already arrived, namely the hypothesis that "at some prehistoric period in his childhood he had been seized with fury (which had subsequently become latent) against the father whom he loved so much" [87-88].³⁷ From our perspective, though,

Poison', for example) with the idea that the criminal is a kind of artist, and the artist a kind of criminal.

³⁷When a father oppresses his son, let alone beats him on a regular basis, then singling out the boy's sexual desire for his mother as the wellspring of his parricidal thoughts would seem to be a problematic enough move - *even if that desire had already been conclusively proved to exist*. But to deduce the existence of that sexual desire merely from the presence of the parricidal wishes, as Freud arguably does, would seem to be highly illegitimate. The contamination of "oedipal" data by fatherly violence is present right from the beginning. The very name "Oedipus" ("swollen foot") refers to an horrendous act of mythical child abuse. Oedipus acquired his deformity when, three days after his birth, on the orders of his parents, his ankles were pierced and bound with a leather thong, and he was left to die on a desert mountain. (As we have seen, this attempt to cheat the oracle's "prophecy of parricide" [Sophocles, 1993: 31] is undone when a kindly servant takes pity on the infant.) Freud, removing the deeds of Oedipus from their context, reads the myth and the play as a revelation of the universal will to parricide. To Freud, the myth is about Oedipus's inability to escape his fate. It complicates the Freudian reading when we consider that the myth also demonstrates the inability of Laius, the father, to elude *his* destiny. Fate decrees that he will one day be succeeded by his son; his attempt to abort the inevitable by means of violent oppression is met by a lethal return of serve. To put it crudely, Laius was asking for it. This point seems to be underlined by the circumstances of the parricidal act, as related by Oedipus:

The old man in the carriage was waiting for his chance.
He waited till I passed him. And then, he struck me
Full on the head with his two-pronged stick -
The kind you use for goading the horses
To make them gallop. I paid him back
With interest, and double quick.
I whacked him, savagely, with my staff,
And knocked him out of the carriage.... [Sophocles, 1993: 35]

Laius treats Oedipus the adult stranger the same way he dealt with Oedipus the baby child: violently, from on high. "I struck a man who struck me, in self-defence," as Oedipus puts it in *Oedipus at Colonus*. "Was that a crime?" [Sophocles, 1993: 76].

There is an element of self-defence, too, in the crime of the supposed model for the female complex: the matricide Electra, who says to her mother:

It is you,
Your hatred and ill-treatment, drive me on
To act against my nature; villainy
Is taught by vile example. [Sophocles, 1977: 87]

But Freud can of course write off these political elements of *Oedipus Rex* and *Electra* as mere secondary revisions of the core psychological content. This manoeuvre, which effectively allows Freud to neutralise any evidence against the theory of the Oedipus complex, was pioneered in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, as Derrida points out: "nullifying all the differences between 1) Oedipus, 2) the legend, and 3) Sophocles's tragedy, Freud formulates a rule: the 'secondary revision of the material' includes

the important thing to note is that patriarchal thuggery was so entrenched in the social structure that neither man even *noticed* it, much less entertained the possibility that it might have been enough *in itself* to account for the little boy's outburst, and for his abiding fear of his assailant.³⁸

"The patient believed," Freud goes on to tell us,

that the scene made a permanent impression upon himself as well as upon his father. His father, he said, never beat him again; and he also attributed to this experience a part of the change which

everything in a text that does not make up the semantic core of the two 'principal dreams' that he has just defined (incest with the mother and murder of the father), everything that is foreign to the absolute *nakedness* of these dream-contents. The formal (textual, in the usual sense) differences that, from the outside, affect thus this semantic structure, in this case Oedipus, constitute secondary revisions. For example, whenever critics have considered *Oedipus Rex* to be a tragedy of fate, a conflict between men and gods, a theological drama, etc., what they have considered to be the essential element of the play was actually an afterthought, a garment, a disguise, a fabric added to the *Stoff* itself in order to mask its nakedness" [Derrida, 1975: 33].

³⁸An even more egregious example of this kind of mistake is Freud's 1911 case study of the profoundly disturbed paranoiac Dr Paul Schreber, entitled 'Psychoanalytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia'. Although Freud never met Schreber, and based his analysis entirely on evidence contained in Schreber's autobiography, he still felt able to venture the confident pronouncement that "in the case of Schreber we find ourselves once again on the familiar ground of the father-complex. The patient's struggle with Flechsig became revealed to him as a conflict with God, and we must therefore construe it as an infantile conflict with the father whom he loved.... In infantile experiences such as this the father appears as an interferer with the satisfaction which the child is trying to obtain; this is usually of an auto-erotic character, though at a later date it is often replaced in phantasy by some other satisfaction of a less inglorious kind" [Freud, 1991b: 191-192]. Unfortunately for Freud, sensational information about Schreber's actual relationship with his father has since come to light. As Janet Malcolm entertainingly explains: "In the fifties, [William] Niederland began to delve into the background of Schreber. What he found was horrifying. Schreber *père* was revealed as a tyrant and a sadist, and the childhood of Schreber *fils* (and his sisters and brother) as a nightmare of physical and mental oppression, imposed in the name of the father's Teutonic educational ideals. The most horrifying of Niederland's findings, and those most directly relevant to Paul Schreber's craziness, concerned the father's invention of orthopedic devices involving straps, belts, and iron bars for the straightening of children's posture.... Niederland, an orthodox New York analyst, presented his findings as a reverent complication of Freud's paper rather than as a challenge to it.... However, in 1973 Morton Schatzman, a young American psychiatrist living in England, published a book called *Soul Murder: Persecution in the Family* ... which proposes a clear cause-and-effect relationship between the oppression of the child and the madness of the man." Schatzman, as Malcolm puts it, "did a good deal more than murmur, 'My, how interesting!' as Niederland had done. 'Christ, how appalling!' is the tone of Schatzman's book ..." [Malcolm, 1984: 78-79, 79-80].

came over his own character. From that time forward he was a coward - out of fear of the violence of his own rage. His whole life long, moreover, he was terribly afraid of blows, and used to creep away and hide, filled with terror and indignation, when one of his brothers or sisters was beaten. [86]

Lucky enough to live in a culture which views violence of this kind as profoundly damaging, we do not require any elaborate theoretical constructs to explain why somebody who has been regularly thumped as a toddler might develop a lasting fear of blows. Nor would we regard it as suspicious if a child should "creep away and hide, full of terror and indignation", when one of its siblings is being mercilessly thrashed. But to Freud, this behaviour seems to confirm the presence in his subject of perverse (albeit universal) hidden passions. His suggestion that the Rat Man's cowardice stems from a fear of the violence of *his own rage* would be more convincing if he had fully tested, or even recognised, the banal possibility that it stemmed from a fear of the violence of his father's rage. Obviously one must remember that psychological disorders are complicated affairs, but some of the Rat Man's behaviour looks like that of a man more afraid of external assault than of his own "passion". In Freud's consulting room, for example, we find the Rat Man

avoiding my proximity for fear of my giving him a beating. If he stayed on the sofa he behaved like some one in desperate terror trying to save himself from castigations of terrific violence; he would bury his head in his hands, cover his face with his arm, jump up suddenly and run away, his features distorted with pain, and so on. He remembered that his father had had a passionate

temper, and sometimes in his violence had not known where to stop. [89-90]

But let us consider Freud's diagnosis of the Rat Man in more detail. Early in the course of the analysis, Freud advances to his patient the hypothesis that "the source from which his hostility to his father derived its indestructibility was evidently something in the nature of *sensual desires*, and that in connection he must have felt his father as in some way or other an *interference*" [62 - emphasis in original]. He soon develops a more elaborate version of this thesis:

I ventured to put forward a construction to the effect that when he was a child of under six he had been guilty of some sexual misdemeanour connected with masturbation and had been soundly castigated for it by his father. This punishment, according to my hypothesis, had, it was true, put an end to his masturbating, but on the other hand it had left behind it an ineradicable grudge against his father and had established him for all time in his role of an interferer in the patient's sexual enjoyment. [85]

To Freud, the revelation of the beating incident comes as a thorough vindication of this hypothesis. But if we refer back to his account of the scene, we will find that while it certainly shows the father interfering in the Rat Man's enjoyment of life, it does not show him interfering in his *sexual* enjoyment. There is nothing in the story as we have it to suggest that the incident gave the boy a reason to hold an

oedipal grudge against his father, as distinct from the kind of grudge any person might feel against somebody who beats them up.³⁹

³⁹It will not hurt to re-emphasize the point that the sexual element *must be there* in order for a phenomenon to qualify as oedipal. This was a point on which Freud himself, in theory, rigorously insisted. Consider his irate response when, in 1910, the renegade analyst Alfred Adler dared to develop theories in which the motivating force of sexuality was downplayed. "He has created for himself a world system without love," Freud said of Adler, "and I am in the process of carrying out on him the revenge of the offended goddess Libido" [Webster, 1995: 359]. The revenge took the form of expelling Adler from the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society. "Freud ... insisted," wrote the analyst Max Graf, "that if one followed Adler and dropped the sexual basis of psychic life, one was no more a Freudian" [quoted by Webster, 1995: 362]. It follows that Freud himself, at those moments when he forgot about the sexual basis of the Oedipus complex, was not being an authentic Freudian either.

In his book *Freud: The Assault on Truth*, Jeffrey Masson quotes from the unpublished diaries of the Hungarian analyst Sándor Ferenczi, another of Freud's disciples who perpetrated theories in which the role of sexuality was devalued. Among other things, Ferenczi "maintained (July 24, 1932) that the Oedipus complex could well be 'the result of real acts on the part of adults, namely violent passions directed towards the child, who then develops a fixation, not from desire [as Freud maintained], but from fear'" [Masson, 1984: 147]. "Ferenczi never dared show this diary to Freud," Masson adds drily.

From Masson's point of view, the exciting thing about Ferenczi's notion is that it resurrects an old theory of Freud's, the theory that had been supplanted in 1897 by the theory of the Oedipus complex: namely, the infamous seduction theory. It is Masson's belief that Freud's seduction theory (which held that hysteria developed as a result of the subject's having been 'seduced' - i.e. molested - as a child, generally by a parent) was and is correct, and that Freud's repudiation of it was "a failure of courage" [xxi].

From the point of view of the present inquiry, Freud's rejection of the seduction hypothesis serves a sharp reminder that his mature theory of the Oedipus complex considers itself to be far above the mundane idea that a son's resentment of his father might have something to do with the latter's objective misdeeds. Indeed, the Oedipus theory grew out of a *rejection* of that essentially sociological notion. "When Freud dropped the seduction theory," as Janet Malcolm puts it, "and introduced the theories of infantile sexuality and the Oedipus complex, he transformed psychoanalysis from a form of social psychiatry into a depth psychology" [Malcolm, 1984: 76]. Or as Anna Freud put it, writing to Masson during the composition of his book: "Keeping up the seduction theory would mean to abandon the Oedipus complex, and with it the whole importance of phantasy life, conscious or unconscious phantasy. In fact, I think there would have been no psychoanalysis afterwards" [Masson, 1984: 113].

The paradox we have been considering is that Freud, owing either to intellectual or to ethical laxity, behaved as though the reams of patriarchal data which supported the sociological explanation of filial resentment in fact supported his own theory of the Oedipus complex, a theory which from the start defined itself by its diametrical *difference* from the sociological approach.

Masson's book contains some disturbing data on the prevalence of child abuse in the late nineteenth century, and is in that respect not incompatible with my argument that Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex was contaminated by an atmosphere in which children were not treated especially well by their fathers. But to suggest that the theory of the Oedipus complex was misguided does not necessarily entail the suggestion that the seduction theory was right. Masson reaches that conclusion only because, paradoxically, he has *too much* faith in Freud. As Frederick Crews points out: "never once does it occur to Masson that there may be more than two candidates for an explanation of 'neurosis.' Nor was this possibility raised in any of the (mostly hostile) reviews that came to my attention. Masson and his antagonists agreed that Freud must have been either right about neurosis before 1897 or right about neurosis thereafter" [Crews, 1986: 64]. An

Freud's hypothesis has pre-empted this problem, as it were, by supposing that the sexuality lay in the *nature of the misdeed* for which the boy was being punished. How does this supposition fare in connection with the beating story? Not very well: not only is there no evidence to support it, there is one piece of evidence which actively contradicts it. The Rat Man's mother, who is the source of the story (the Rat Man himself having forgotten the episode), testifies that "he had been given the punishment because he had bitten some one.... In her account there was no suggestion of his misdeed having been of a sexual nature" [86].

Strangely, Freud goes on to admit that the mother's story, despite contradicting the essential proposition of his hypothesis, is nevertheless one of the best pieces of empirical validation that his hypotheses of this kind have ever received. "It is seldom," he says with some excitement, "that we are in the fortunate position of being able, as in the present instance, to establish the facts upon which ... tales of the individual's prehistoric past are based, by recourse to the unimpeachable testimony of a grown-up person" [87n]. What Freud means, it emerges, is that the mother's story is unimpeachable only in those areas where it supports his hypothesis - that is, in so far as it confirms that the boy was at some point in his childhood soundly castigated by his father, and had a vehement

alternative view of the seduction theory is that it demonstrated Freud's capacity to invent vastly ambitious theoretical structures which had no grounding in reality whatsoever. If the seduction theory was entirely inaccurate, as the orthodox Freudian must believe, is it not possible that the theory with which he replaced it was equally fictional? Crews again: "[A]ll parties to the debate over 'seduction' have shared a radically faulty sense of the way Freud reached his scientific judgements. Taking his apologetics at face value, they have assumed that he drew theoretical conclusions directly from clinical observation, deciding after x number of cases that his patients had fallen ill through molestation but after $x + n$ cases that the preponderance of evidence now lay on the other side. The dispute, then, has been over which set of Freud's observations was the accurate one. But this narrow inductivist perspective overlooks the remoteness of Freud's inferences from any data available to him in the consulting room. While he may or may not have been able to tell whether his patients had been abused in early childhood, the leap to calling such events (or fantasies) neurosegenic had to be largely one of faith" [Crews, 1986: 46-47].

reaction to this. Her suggestion that the boy's misdeed was *not* of a sexual nature, on the other hand, is eminently impeachable.

[T]he statement made by our patient's mother leaves the way open to various possibilities. That she did not proclaim the sexual character of the offence for which the child was punished may have been due to the activity of her own censorship; for with all parents it is precisely this sexual element in their children's past that their own censorship is most anxious to eliminate. But it is just as possible that the child was reproved by his nurse or by his mother herself for some commonplace piece of naughtiness of a non-sexual nature, and that his reaction was so violent that he was castigated by his father. In phantasies of this kind nurses and servants are regularly replaced by the superior figure of the mother. A deeper interpretation of the patient's dreams in relation to this episode revealed the clearest traces of an imaginative production of a positively epic character. In this his sexual desires for his mother and sister and his sister's premature death were linked up with the young hero's chastisement at his father's hand. [87n-88n]

I have quoted this passage in full in order that the reader might appreciate two things. One, the way Freud reads evidence at face value when this suits him, and when it doesn't reads it as a censored or disguised version of the truth. In other words, when confronted with material which does not support his hypotheses, or even absolutely refutes them, Freud simply retreats like a snail into the shell of psychoanalytical doctrine.

The second thing to observe in the above passage is how swiftly the argument turns muddy when Freud is obliged to explain precisely why the bashing of the Rat Man had sexual connotations. "In phantasies of this kind," Freud suddenly says, even though the previous sentence had not been dealing with phantasies at all. It had been dealing, albeit in a speculative way, with objective events. One moment we are talking about what happened, or might have happened; the next we are hearing about the Rat Man's phantasies, and about *Freud's interpretations* of his dreams and imaginative productions.⁴⁰

So the case of the Rat Man offers us a neat summation of the problems we have already identified in oedipal theory. Here, as in so many of the other cases we have looked at, it is not hard for Freud to establish the presence of a fear of the father. There is a wealth of evidence available, and Freud deploys so much of it that one comes to suspect that he is under the impression that it is evidence of something more - or, if one is a conspiracy theorist, that he wants to leave us under that impression. But when it comes to demonstrating the sexual basis of this fear - and this is the very nub of the Freudian project, remember, the very thing that makes it Freudian - Freud has much less to say. As far as raw, untreated evidence for this proposition is concerned, he can produce absolutely nothing. The best he can do is to take a piece of evidence which categorically opposes it, and then proceed to doctor it - or perhaps one should say to Professor it - until it is rendered compatible with his speculations. This is not a particularly impressive manoeuvre, since all it does is demonstrate the point that *anything* can be made to illustrate

⁴⁰It is scarcely fair of Freud to count the Rat Man's dreams as evidence of his sexual desire for his mother, since the meaning of these dreams emerged only after they were subjected to Freudian analysis - that is to say, only after they are decoded with the help of a theory which takes the existence of this primal love of the mother as one of its core *a priori* assumptions. This is like a psychic proving that spirits are real by citing the corroborating testimony of Einstein's ghost.

psychoanalytical doctrine. In short, Freud is able to supply abundant evidence of the male's fear of his father; but when it comes to demonstrating the underlying love of the mother, he is obliged to terminate his visit to the land of hard evidence, and to fly back into the ether of baseless assertion.

What Happened to Jocasta, Not to Mention Electra?⁴¹

So far, we have considered a fair array of evidence which suggests that certain psychological phenomena which Freud defined as "oedipal" might more plausibly be read as emanations of patriarchal culture. But to this line of argument a Freudian would no doubt reply: So what? Patriarchy is an historical circumstance which might well explain a son's hostility to the father. But it is less capable of explaining his erotic attachment to the mother; and not capable at all of explaining the 'oedipal' sentiments of *female* subjects, whose love of the father and hostility to the mother represents the *opposite* of the affective distortion that I have accused patriarchy of producing. At the very best, then, the sexist distortion of family affairs during Freud's age can account convincingly for a mere quarter of all oedipal sentiments. The theory of the Oedipus complex would therefore seem to be impervious to the kind of historical re-reading I have been attempting.

These considerations are all completely valid, so long as we think of the Oedipus complex as a piece of abstract theory, a purely ideal structure. But when oedipal theory is brought into contact with the real

⁴¹I am expanding here on the apt title of an essay by Iza S. Erlich, 'What Happened to Jocasta?' - see page 237.

world - as it must be when Freud considers the evidence for it, for example, or when he uses it as a tool with which to analyse literature, anthropological data, religious sentiments, case histories - it undergoes the transformations that I have referred to above. The mother and daughter end up on the cutting-room floor, as it were, and the hostility of a son towards his father, far from representing the mere quarter of oedipal sentiments that it amounts to in the abstract, seems for all practical purposes to *become* the Oedipus complex. One can see this happening in the following passage from the *Introductory Lectures* :

The son, when quite a little child, already begins to develop a peculiar tenderness towards his mother, whom he looks upon as his own property, regarding his father in the light of a rival who disputes this sole possession of his; similarly the little daughter sees in her mother someone who disturbs her tender relation to her father and occupies a place which she feels she herself could very well fill. Observation shows us how far back these sentiments date, sentiments which we describe by the term Oedipus complex, because in the Oedipus myth the two extreme forms of the wishes arising from the situation of the son - the wish to kill the father and to marry the mother - are realised in an only slightly modified form. [Freud, 1940: 174-175]

In the first sentence Freud is in the realm of pure assertion. It is worth noting, though, that even in that realm Freud gives the complex of the boy primary status: the girl's complex is a kind of reflection of it. In the second sentence, inaugurated by that key word "observation", Freud starts to bring the theory into contact with facts, albeit the facts of a myth. Here the female subject disappears altogether. Moreover, in Freud's

formulation of the male complex a subtle but significant alteration occurs: the son's wish to kill his father - in theory the *secondary*, consequential wish of his complex - is shifted into a position of primacy.⁴² In the space of a single paragraph, Freud demonstrates his propensity to place the male's complex at centre stage, and then to focus the spotlight on his hostility to the father.

Freud's lack of practical interest in the boy's erotic attachment to his mother - the attachment which is, one has to keep reminding oneself, the core of the boy's complex - is not easy to demonstrate in a short space. It is hard to quote a silence. But that there was such a silence is not really in dispute. Even writers who are largely sympathetic to Freud have recognised its existence. Peter Gay, for example:

Throughout his life as an analyst, he recognised the crucial importance of the mother for the child's development. He could hardly do less. 'Whoever has been fortunate enough to evade the incestuous fixation of his libido does not wholly escape its influence,' he wrote in 1905. 'Above all a man looks for the memory picture of his mother as it had dominated him since the beginning of his childhood.' Yet, almost deliberately evading this insight,⁴³ Freud exiled mothers to the margins of his case histories. Dora's mother, beset by what Freud calls a

⁴²While not strictly consistent with the theory of the Oedipus complex, this order of priority is consonant with the Oedipus *myth*, in which sexual desire for the mother is secondary to violent hostility to the father - in the chronological sense, obviously, and also in respect of its weight of meaning (see note 55 below). Another moment at which Freud reverses the terms of the complex in order to achieve a better fit with the data comes in *An Autobiographical Study*, when he is recalling the project he undertook in *Totem and Taboo*: "My starting-point was the striking correspondence between the two taboo-injunctions of totemism (not to kill the totem and not to have sexual relations with any woman of the same totem-clan) and the two elements of the Oedipus complex (killing the father and taking the mother to wife)" [Freud, 1950c: 123].

⁴³One has to quarrel with Gay's use of the term "insight" here. How can Gay tell that it is an insight, as distinct from a wild guess, without the very evidence whose absence he is in the middle of discussing?

'housewife's psychosis,' is a silent, minor actor in the family melodrama. Little Hans's mother, though to her husband's mind the cause of her son's neurosis with her seductive behaviour, is subordinated to that husband.... The Wolf Man's biological mother achieves only limited significance as a partner in the primal scene he had observed, or fantasized, as a little boy, though certainly mother substitutes contributed to his neurosis. The Rat Man's mother makes some fleeting appearances, mainly as the person whom the patient consults before he starts his analysis. And Schreber's mother might as well have not lived.⁴⁴ [Gay, 1988: 505 - the 1905 quotation from Freud is taken from the *Three Essays on Sexuality*.]

In connection with this point, Gay quotes from an essay of Iza S. Erlich's called 'What Happened to Jocasta?':

Reading these cases, I could not help wondering about the discrepancy in Freud's presentations of his patients' fathers and mothers. Why is it always the father who becomes the central part of the child-parent relationship, regardless of whether the child is male or female?... Perhaps these portrayals were bound up with Freud's self-analysis, or, more specifically, with his preoccupation at that time with the relationship between himself and his father. Whatever the reason, the 'oedipal mother' in Freud's early work is a static figure, a Jocasta who unknowingly

⁴⁴This sentence can be read in a more literal way than Gay intended: in light of the horrendous tortures which Herr Schreber turned out to have inflicted on his son (see note 38 above), it is probably true that Schreber's mother might as well not have lived, at least as far as the genesis of her son's neurosis was concerned.

plays out her destiny while Laius springs back to life. [Quoted by Gay, 1988: 718-719]

Erlich speculatively attributes the blind-spot to Freud's relationship with his father; Gay, to his feelings for his mother. It is charitable of these writers to use Freud's theories to explain why there is a gaping hole in the empirical base of Freud's theories. A more stringent analyst of this evidential lacuna might say that it renders psychoanalysis invalid as a mode of explaining anything. If so, we would be obliged to assess Freud's blind-spot in non-psychoanalytical terms, perhaps even with reference to the standards by which other scientists are judged. How would we characterise it then?

If Freud largely overlooked the boy's feelings towards his mother, then how on earth could he distinguish between the resentment that the son of an authoritarian father feels *because* of that authoritarianism, and the resentment that he feels through sexual jealousy? The answer is that he couldn't. This, you might naively suppose, left Freud with a large problem. When you watch him in action, however, you tend to find him profiting from the confusion, by adducing *all* resentment of the father as solid proof of the Oedipus theory. Freud's responsibility to science - especially, one would have thought, to his own science - was to do the very opposite: to distinguish scrupulously between the emotional distortions produced by patriarchy and the emotional patterns which he considered to be eternal, patriarchy or no patriarchy. His failure to do so means that it is Freud himself whom one must largely blame for the lack of rigour with which the term 'oedipal' is bandied about today. Far too often one hears the term deployed without any consideration at all of the eroticism that is meant to be its defining element: either it is used as a

mere synonym for hostility to the father; or, worse, to describe hostility to the parents in general; or, worse still, to describe hostility to authority in general; or, worst of all, to describe a girl's hostility to her father!⁴⁵ The insight that authority provokes rebellion can hardly be credited to Freud; indeed it can hardly be called an insight. Nor did Freud, *in theory*, want to be credited with it. His depth psychology asserted, in the abstract, something far, far more ambitious than that. But when it came to demonstrating the rightness of that theory, Freud tended to point to cases which did not necessarily prove anything more profound than that sons feared their fathers. In that era especially, such a fear could scarcely be said to constitute proof of those infantile erotic drives which were the theory's chief novelty.

There is one obvious way in which Freud might have risen above this problem, and proved the validity of the Oedipus theory once and for all. He could have focussed on the complex of the female. A girl's attraction to her father and hostility to her mother cannot possibly be dismissed as a mere effect of political conditions. By feeling that way, the

⁴⁵Writing about Jane Austen, Brigid Brophy says that "Her moral dilemmas are often drawn in precisely oedipal terms: the end of *Northanger Abbey* explicitly questions whether the story's tendency 'be altogether to recommend parental tyranny or reward filial disobedience'. A childish nonsense piece discloses no less explicitly the matters on which her fantasy played ...: 'I murdered my father at an early period of my life, I have since murdered my Mother, and I am now going to murder my sister'" [Brophy, 1967: 251-252]. Disobedience of tyrannical parents and a fantasy involving the murder of *both* parents are not 'precisely oedipal' phenomena at all. Filial disobedience can only be classified as oedipal in the Freudian sense if it can be shown to be sexually generated - that is to say, if it can be reduced to an essential disobedience of the father on the part of a boy, or to a disobedience of a mother on the part of a girl. And one can hardly apply the term 'oedipal' to a fantasy in which a girl's father, the figure whom Freud would consider the object of her desires, features as the first victim of a killing spree. On the other hand, this fantasy is intelligible as a reaction to parental oppression, for which the father can be held primarily responsible.

Since Brophy has just mentioned *Oedipus Rex*, it is conceivable, although not very likely, that she is employing the adjective 'oedipal' in strictly a Sophoclean sense, rather than a Freudian one. But that possibility is not particularly helpful to Freud either, for it would involve the proposal that the rebellion of Sophocles's Oedipus was purely political.

girl is swimming against the current of patriarchy, and thereby supplying us with a demonstration of some powerful innate drives.

But Freud had little to say about the complex of the female, beyond making the occasional assertion that it existed. He never even deigned to give it an official name: as late as the *Outline* - his final, unfinished work - he was still referring to it as the "feminine Oedipus attitude" [SE, 23: 194]. One could hardly ask for a neater indication than that phrase of the secondary importance that Freud assigned to the female's complex. His typical procedure was to speak as if the male condition were synonymous with the human one, leaving it up to the reader to remember the existence of females and to deduce the features of their complex by reshuffling the terms of the male one. At best, he paid the female complex a kind of lip service. "As you see, I have only described the relationship of a boy to his father and mother,"⁴⁶ he says in the *Introductory Lectures*, having just given a run-down of the classic Oedipus situation: "things proceed in the same way, with the necessary reversal, in little girls ... " [Freud, 1940: 280]. By accident or design, this policy of Freud's prevents oedipal theory from coming into any direct contact with the situation which would have been its severest test. Only by engaging directly with the experiences of the female subject would Freud have been able to prove the Oedipus theory correct beyond reasonable doubt. For if the female complex is merely deduced, "with the necessary reversal", from that of the male, and if the complex of the male is, as we have seen, constructed with alarmingly little *empirical* reference to his feelings for his mother, then in effect the theory of the Oedipus complex is built entirely on the phenomenon of male hostility to the father - a phenomenon wholly attributable to the politics of Freud's day.

⁴⁶Note again, incidentally, how within the male complex the boy's relationship with his *father* is elevated to a position of primacy.

"Freud," Peter Gay tells us, "repeatedly deplored the way that the prized respectability of his time forced women patients into reticence, and hence made them less helpfully indiscreet than the men. It followed, as he observed in the early 1920s, that psychoanalysts knew a great deal more about the sexual development of boys than about that of girls" [Gay, 1988: 505].⁴⁷ While deploring the sexism of his time, Freud might have paused to contemplate some of its other possible effects. For one thing, it was capable of producing emotional distortions which look alarmingly similar to the ones he ascribed to child sexuality. Moreover, if sexism was entrenched enough to make women more reticent than men, then one fails to see how it can be valid to deduce the features of the female complex by simply reversing the emotional disposition of the male. Males and females were separated by far too many socially-structured divisions to allow ready translation of male experience into female terms. The "necessary reversal" was too big an ask.

There are moments when Freud's forgetting of the female complex seems to involve more than the sexism of his time, or the alleged unavailability of data resulting from it - moments when it is suspiciously convenient for Freud to forget the existence of females altogether. One such moment comes in *Totem and Taboo* (1913):

No detailed analytic examination has yet been made of children's animal phobias, though they would greatly repay study.... But a few cases of this kind directed towards the larger animals have proved accessible to analysis and have thus yielded their secret to the investigator. It was the same in every case: where the children concerned were boys, their fear related at bottom to

⁴⁷In 'The Infantile Genital Organization', Freud writes: "Unfortunately we can describe this state of things only as it affects the male child; the corresponding processes in the little girl are unknown to us" [SE, 19: 142].

their father and had merely been displaced on to the animal.

[Freud, 1957: 127-128]

And where the children concerned were girls? Bizarrely, scandalously, Freud passes over that elementary question in silence. He forgets - or thinks that we will forget - the existence of half the human race.

Why does Freud so conspicuously neglect to discuss the case of girls here? What purpose does this lacuna serve? To answer these questions, we need to understand what Freud is in the process of arguing here. He is trying to use animal phobias as an example of tensions arising from the Oedipus complex. This argument could be empirically clinched with the following affirmation: "it was the same in every case: the fear of the children related at bottom to *their parent of the opposite sex*, and had merely been displaced on to the animal." But something prevents Freud from uttering so comprehensive a statement. Instead he refers only to boys and fathers. Why? We have to suspect one of two things: either he has no evidence at all about animal phobias in girls, or else he has evidence of their fears which conflicts with his thesis.

Again one has to stress that this absent evidence is precisely the evidence which Freud really needs to produce. We need to see a young girl experiencing an intense and nightmarish fear of her mother before we can believe that a boy's similar fear of his father has a sexual basis. If Freud wants to convince us of the irrational - i.e. unconscious, erotic, primal, in a word oedipal - basis of these phobias, the mother-fear of girls is precisely the phobia he ought to be focussing on, for unlike the father-fear of boys this fear is not explicable as a rational fear. By passing over the female case in silence, Freud does nothing to allay one's suspicion that the Oedipus complex does not exist.

Let us pursue the argument of *Totem and Taboo*, and watch the way that the forgetting of females continues to function in Freud's favour. Having established to his own satisfaction the oedipal basis of animal phobias, Freud integrates this information into his main argument, which concerns totems. The characteristics of male animal phobias, he says, "justify us, in my opinion, in substituting the father for the totem animal in the formula for totemism (in the case of males)." [131] From this we move to the broader conclusion that it is "probable that the totemic system - like Little Hans's animal phobia and little Arpad's poultry perversion - *was a product of the conditions involved in the Oedipus complex*" [132 - italics added].

Here we have, then, a shining example of that slackness of thought by which male fear of the father is allowed, to all intents and purposes, to *be* the Oedipus complex. True, Freud does vaguely gesture towards the existence of females with that bracketed phrase, "in the case of males". But let us examine this phrase. It amounts to a telling sleight-of-hand. What it says is "in the case of males". But what it means, or wants to mean, is surely something far more: it means in the case of males *only*. For it is absolutely imperative that the totem animal does not equate to the father *in the case of females too*. That would thoroughly desexualise the boy's fear - and Freud's oedipal analysis, perhaps even the theory of the Oedipus complex itself, would collapse. But the problem for Freud is that only the weaker statement, "in the case of males", has been empirically validated, with reference to the cases of Little Hans and Little Arpad. The statement he really needs to make, "in the case of males *only*", cannot be justified, for it requires that the case of girls has been examined and an opposite kind of fear discovered in them. The bracketed phrase is Freud's way of assuring us that the phenomena of

which he is speaking are oedipal. But it points us, I would suggest, to the very reason why they aren't.

A charitable reader might think that Freud has inserted the bracketed phrase in order to acknowledge his silence about the female case, perhaps even to offer a whisper of an apology for it. Perhaps Freud means to tell us that he is sticking to the case of males only for the moment, and only in the interests of keeping the argument flowing. But there will be no point at which he does break his silence, and during the next step of Freud's argument we can see why: the silence is fundamental to the structure of his thesis.

The move in question is Freud's speculative location of the origins of totemism in an actual historical event. He invokes Darwin's notion of the primal horde, the "earliest state of society" which consists of "a violent and jealous father who keeps all the females for himself and drives away his sons as they grow up" [141]. To Darwin's hypothesis Freud adds one of his own: that the primal horde met its end in an act of parricide. The guilty sons then "revoked their deed by forbidding the killing of the totem, the substitute for their father" [143]. Up to this moment in the argument it has been possible to compensate for Freud's silence on the female subject by extrapolating from the attitudes of the male an improbable, but theoretically conceivable, mother-fear on the part of girls. But how can we fit the psychology of the female into *this* twist of Freud's narrative? If the psychological significance of the male's totem proceeds from an actual act of parricide, how did the female attitude to her totem evolve? If the male complex originated in an actual deed, a thoroughly male-centred incident for which history offers no parallel on the female side, then what has happened to the symmetry between the male and female cases which Freud relies on when he tells

us that the features of the female complex can be deduced, "with the necessary reversal", from those of the male one?

The theory of the Oedipus complex rests on the assumption that the prime difference between males and females, the difference that really matters psychologically, is genital. But when Freud starts to speak of the primal horde, we get a sense of how brittle this assumption is, how apt it is to shatter when brought into contact with the real world, or even with an hypothesis about the real world. By ascribing to parricide a primal reality which matricide doesn't have, Freud seems to confirm our suspicion that although male father-hostility is a real enough phenomenon, female mother-hostility is a fiction, a purely theoretical construct. At the very least, Freud has irrevocably conceded that there is a peculiarity about male father-hostility, an element in its motivation which exceeds the gender-neutral factor of "sexual rivalry". He has allowed politics to contaminate his theory. He has confessed that psychology can be altered by an oppressively patriarchal social structure. And he has admitted that that structure remains in place: "The family was a restoration of the former primal horde and it gave back to fathers a large portion of their former rights" [149].

But Freud's forgetting of the female has not yet reached its acme. This comes when he attempts to extend his oedipal account from the construction of totems to the emergence of "the concept of God" [147]:

The psychoanalysis of individual human beings ... teaches us with quite special insistence that the god of each of them is formed in the likeness of his father, that his personal relation to God depends on his relation to his father in the flesh and oscillates and changes along with that relation, and that at bottom God is

nothing other than an exalted father. As in the case of totemism, psycho-analysis recommends us to have faith in the believers who call God their father.... If psychoanalysis deserves any attention, then ... the paternal element in that concept must be a most important one. [147]

Sexist language is by now the only thing holding Freud's argument together. The truth of the matter is that psychoanalysis recommends us to have faith only in the *male* believer who calls God his father. The female believer who calls God *her* father presents Freud with a problem. It is very hard to accept that Freud did not perceive this problem. And therefore it is very hard not to suspect that there was something deliberate about his response to it, which involved pretending it did not exist, covering it with a linguistic smokescreen. Freud's sexism is, like any sexism, reprehensible in its own right.⁴⁸ But behind it lies a deeper scandal: without the marginalisation of the female subject, the theory of the Oedipus complex simply would not work.

Consider the last quoted sentence. "If psychoanalysis deserves any attention, then ... the paternal element in that concept [of God] must be a most important one." Just what does Freud mean by *paternal* here? In psychoanalytical theory, the word "father", and by extension the adjective "paternal", can mean one of two vastly different things, depending on

⁴⁸The view that Freud's sexism can be excused on the grounds that all bourgeois Victorians were sexist is spurious. The fact is that Freud was exposed to enlightened views on women's issues, and chose to reject them. In 1880, he translated John Stuart Mill's 1869 essay 'Subjection of Women' - in which Mill compared the exploitation of women to that of black slaves - into German. In a letter to his then fiancée Martha Bernays, Freud offered the following verdict on Mill's ideas: "Any girl, even with no right to vote or legal competence, whose hand a man kisses and for whose love he dares all, could have set him straight" [Gay, 1988: 39]. Elsewhere in the same letter, Freud gives this line of argument a more comprehensive airing: "It seems a completely unrealistic notion to send women into the struggle for existence in the same way as men. Am I to think of my delicate, sweet girl as a competitor? After all, the encounter could only end by my telling her ... that I love her, and that I will make every effort to get her out of the competitive role into the quiet, undisturbed activity of my home" [quoted by Decker, 1991: 106].

whether the man in question is being viewed from his son's perspective or his daughter's. One's natural assumption is that Freud is using the word from the son's perspective here, as he did when discussing the paternal element of animal phobias, and the paternal element of totemism. But if "paternal" is being used in that sense, we are being asked to believe that the concept of God has a maternal element in the case of female believers - in other words, that females in general believe in a female God. Obviously Freud would not seriously advance this suggestion, so we must have read him wrongly. He must be using the word 'paternal' in its traditional, pre-Freudian sense. This squares with the unignorable fact that the Judaeo-Christian God tends to be God the Father for male and female believers alike. But this raises another problem. To suggest that the general authority of God the Father emanates from the general authority of the flesh father is to make a point about the flesh father's *power*, not about his status as an object of erotic desire or envy. It is to admit that the earthly father exercises God-like authority over his son and daughter both. This is a profoundly unFreudian observation, one which exposes the folly of trying to derive sexual meaning from a son's fear of his father.

When probed, then, this sentence turns out to have two possible meanings - one Freudian but radically implausible, the other plausible but radically unFreudian. Freud wants it to mean something in between: he wants us to think that what he is saying is both Freudian and plausible. He has written a vague and lazy sentence, and he needs it to be read in a similar way. Only if we forget the existence of females entirely can we believe that the juicy-looking fact that God is God the Father is a point in Freud's favour.

Perhaps we can clear this matter up by examining a passage Freud wrote twenty years later, in a section of the *New Introductory Lectures* (1933) which deals once more with the question of God 'the father':

Psychoanalysis infers that he really is the father, with all the magnificence in which he once appeared to the small child ... the same person to whom the child owed its existence, the father (*or more correctly, no doubt, the parental agency compounded of the father and mother*), also protected and watched over him in his feeble and helpless state.... Even now [as an adult] he cannot do without the protection he enjoyed as a child. But he has long since recognised, too, that his father is a being of narrowly restricted power, and not equipped with every excellence. He therefore harks back to the mnemonic image of the father whom in his childhood he so greatly overvalued.... [163 - emphasis added]

The beginning of the passage seems to reiterate the novel, bold, specifically psychoanalytical contention that God and one's flesh-and-blood father are intimately connected concepts. But inside the brackets comes a qualification which blunts that sensational claim: we learn that God is not, after all, a glorification of the *flesh-and-blood* father, but a projection of the father's *power*, or more accurately of the parental power of which the father happens to wield the lion's share. In other words, Freud relinquishes his own special conception of the father - whereby the father is defined as the object of sexual desire for the girl and of sexual hostility for the boy - and adopts a more or less Marxist conception of him, whereby his main difference from his wife is political, conditioned by the imbalance of power under the patriarchal system. Freud effectively surrenders, then, before the fact of the maleness of God. It is a

fact which psychoanalysis can explain only by ceasing to be psychoanalysis.

A parallel problem seems to arise in the case of the superego, or ego-ideal - the agency which forms when the Oedipus complex dissolves. "[T]he ego ideal had the task of repressing the Oedipus complex; indeed, it is to that revolutionary event that it owes its existence..." [Freud, 1947: 34]. Writing in *The Ego and the Id* (1923), Freud describes the consequences of the dissolution of the Oedipus complex in boys, and repeats the old formula that things happen "in a precisely analogous way ... in a little girl" [Freud, 1991d: 371]. But Freud's descriptions of the superego are so male-centred that it is very difficult to imagine analogous processes in a girl. In 'Dostoevsky and Parricide', for example, he gives this account of the superego: "the identification with the father finally makes a permanent place for itself in the ego. It is received into the ego, but establishes itself there as a separate agency in contrast to the rest of the content of the superego. We then give it the name of superego.... If the father was hard, violent and cruel, the super-ego takes over those attributes from him..." [1961: 185]. We can easily accept that certain Victorian fathers were "hard and cruel", and we can hardly doubt that the consciences of many of their sons had similar attributes - remember the conscience of Dorian Gray, for example. But what of the female subject? While it is not hard to imagine her conscience being every bit as "hard" and "cruel" as a male's - as Freud himself observed, Victorian sexual morality was tougher on women than it was on men - it is difficult to picture the generation of hard and cruel mothers at the root of this toughness. One is more inclined to think of those mothers as being relatively indulgent; but if they were, of course, then one would be obliged to conclude that the consciences of their daughters were accordingly easy-going.

One can start to clear up the mystery by consulting the editorial footnote of James Strachey's which accompanies Freud's remarks in *The Ego and the Id*. Strachey explains: "The idea that the outcome of the Oedipus complex was 'precisely analogous' in girls and boys was abandoned by Freud not long after this" [ibid: 371n]. He then refers us to the 1925 paper 'Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes'. One turns to that paper with alacrity, eager to learn about the distinctive features of the female conscience. And one finds this:

I cannot escape the notion (though I hesitate to give it expression) that for women the level of what is ethically normal is different from what it is in men. Their superego is never so inexorable, so impersonal, so independent of its emotional origins as we require it to be in men. Character-traits which critics of every epoch have brought up against women - that they show less sense of justice than men, that they are less ready to submit to the great necessities of life, that they are more often influenced in their judgements by feelings of affection or hostility - all these would be amply accounted for by the modification in the formation of their super-ego which we have already inferred. We must not allow ourselves to be deflected from such conclusions by the denials of the feminists, who are anxious to force us to regard the two sexes as equal in position and worth.... [1950o: 196-197]

The reason Freud "cannot escape" this notion is because he is bent on interpreting conscience as an emanation of sexuality. He has been forced into making this egregious pronouncement not by observation of the real world, but by the outlandish dictates of his own theories. His sole gesture

toward empirical substantiation is to mention the nasty mutterings of unnamed sexists down the years. And if Freud is so hesitant to give expression to his offensive thesis, then why does he repeat it in 1933, in an infamous passage of the *New Introductory Lectures*?

In a boy the Oedipus complex, in which he desires his mother and would like to get rid of his father as being a rival, develops naturally from the phase of his phallic sexuality. The threat of castration compels him, however, to give up that attitude. Under the impression of the danger of losing his penis, the Oedipus complex is abandoned, repressed and, in the most normal cases, entirely destroyed, and a severe superego is set up as its heir. What happens with a girl is almost the opposite. The castration complex prepares for the Oedipus complex instead of destroying it; the girl is driven out of her attachment to her mother through the influence of her envy for the penis and she enters the Oedipus situation as though into a haven of refuge. In the absence of fear of castration the chief motive is lacking which leads boys to surmount the Oedipus complex. Girls remain in it for an inordinate length of time; they demolish it late and, even so, incompletely. In these circumstances the formation of the superego must suffer;⁴⁹ it cannot attain the strength and independence which give it its cultural significance, and feminists are not pleased when we point out to them the effects of this factor upon the average feminine character.⁵⁰ [SE XXII: 129]

⁴⁹Freud's use of the word 'suffer' in this context is a subtle yet outrageous piece of sexism which is in danger of being overshadowed by the egregious bigotry of the passage as a whole. To think of the female as "suffering" when her development differs from that of the male is to define the male as the healthy norm, of which the female is a kind of malformed version.

⁵⁰Freud was right to predict that feminists would find fault with this pronouncement, but wrong in his smug presumption that they would do so merely for the trivial reason that it

This must not be brushed aside as a sample of naughty but trivial sexism on the part of Freud. As I have demonstrated, sexism is fundamental to oedipal theory: it will not work without it. Oedipal theory is at its best, its most convincing, when the female subject is forgotten altogether. When the awkward fact of her existence comes up, Freud has two options. The first is to allow the experiences of the female subject to force him into a theoretical retreat, a watering down of his conviction that all of the male's father-related feelings - his fear or resentment of authority, his conscience, his relations with God - were purely functions of sexuality. We have seen Freud forced into such a retreat when his speculations about male belief in God "the father" came up against the regrettable fact that females did not believe *en masse* in a female God. Freud's second option was to go on the attack, to affirm that what his theories and methodology whispered was really true: women were second-class humans. This is the option Freud embraces in the passages quoted above, in which we find him making the remarkable assertion that half of the human race either has a defective conscience or no conscience at all. This claim is sexist and indefensible, but it is only a

impugned their characters. Feminists have rightly pointed to this passage, and to others like it, as proof of Freud's scandalously muddled thinking about female psychology. Elizabeth Grosz, writing in *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary*, provides a neat summary of the gaps and confusions in Freud's narrative of female development. "In Freud's account of the oedipus complex repression is the central means by which the boy resolves the castration threat: he represses his desire for the mother through the establishment of the superego which is based on his identification with the father-figure.... Although Freud presumes that repression must operate in the case of the girl as well, he remains obscure about what it is she represses. For example, he claims that the girl's superego is weaker than the boy's; yet he also implies that in some sense at least, the girl is more repressed, and less sexual, than the boy.... Nor is it clear how she has access to the establishment of a superego, given that an identification with the father's authority is precluded precisely because of her castrated status. If the girl does not resolve her oedipus complex through repression but, as Freud claims, gradually accepts her castrated position and may remain in an oedipal attachment to her father for many years, then Freud leaves entirely obscure how her unconscious is formed. It may be for this reason that Irigaray asks whether women have an unconscious, or rather, whether women are the unconscious, the repressed, for men" [Grosz, 1993: 383-384].

logical extension of oedipal theory. It follows that oedipal theory is sexist and indefensible at its core. Freud's rare and calamitous investigations of the female Oedipus complex made this embarrassingly clear. The male was the only subject in whom Freud could confidently identify and demonstrate hostility to the parent of the opposite sex, because the male was the only subject in whom it existed.

Degeneration as Parricide

In light of these deficiencies of oedipal theory, our discussion of parricidal themes in decadent literature takes on a greater significance. If male father-hostility practically *is* the Oedipus complex, then it is quite conceivable that Freud's theory was *entirely* rooted in the historical conditions that we find behind the literary theme of parricide.

A good way of resuming our analysis of the decadents is to consider a passage from Richard Fenn's recent book *The Death of Herod*. (Herod, as we shall see when discussing Wilde's *Salomé*, is an interesting figure in the history of parricidal politics.) In contextualising Herod's troubled reign, Fenn makes some useful general observations:

[T]he succession in a patrilineal society must go smoothly if that society is to continue to believe in its ability to own and control the sources of life. If the society in question is going to reproduce itself, sons must succeed fathers, and kings-designate must succeed the former ruler. That process of reproduction occurs, however, in many spheres: in the fertility of the fields, in the deference of the young to the old, in success in hunting or in agriculture, in the

martial or in the fine arts. The issue in each case is the same, that is, that the vitality of the society depends on the succession of one generation and of one regime to another. A society whose vitality is in question leads its members into a sense of despair: a haunting and increasingly palpable awareness that the promises of future and abundant life will never be realised. [Fenn, 1992: 132]

These remarks ring true when tested against the sense of despair that haunted the European *fin de siècle*. The succession of kings by kings-designate did not always happen smoothly, owing to such trends as democracy and assassination. Nor did the young necessarily defer to the old any more - and why should they in the wake of Darwin? As Max Nordau said, the degenerate movement formed "a union against taking one's hat off to people" [quoted by Hirsch, 1897: 194]. And society's lack of vitality was certainly accompanied by a crisis in patrilineal relations.

Right from the beginning of the decadence, the theme of decay was strongly associated with the family. In Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839), the 'House' refers both to the decaying residence of the Usher family, with its "bleak walls ... vacant eye-like windows ... a few rank sedges ... a few white trunks of decayed trees", and to the family itself, which is in a similarly advanced state of decomposition [Poe, 1979: 245]. Once vigorous, the clan now has only two surviving members: the lady Madeline, who suffers from a "settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of her person" which has "long baffled the skill of her physicians"; and her brother Roderick, who has an obscure nervous illness but is still likely to survive his sister. "Her death ... would leave him (him the hopeless and the frail) the last of the ancient race of the Ushers" [252]. Discussing the family's decline, the narrator alludes to

the very remarkable fact, that the stem of the Usher race, all time-honoured as it was, had put forth, at no period, any enduring branch; in other words, that the entire family lay in the direct line of descent, and had always, with very trifling and very temporary variation, so lain. It was this deficiency, I considered, while running over in thought the perfect keeping of the character of the premises with the accredited character of the people, and while speculating upon the possible influence which the one, in the long lapse of centuries, might have exercised upon the other - it was this deficiency, perhaps, of collateral issue, and the consequent undeviating transmission, from sire to son, of the patrimony with the name, which had, at length, so identified the two as to merge the original title of the estate in the quaint and equivocal appellation of the 'House of Usher'. [246-247]

Ancient families are as susceptible to the process of decay as ancient buildings are. And it is in the relation between sire and son, the line down which power and money and property are conveyed, that the decline is visible at its most abject. But perhaps 'abject' is the wrong word. Like later decadents, Poe seems more inclined to wallow in decay than to mourn it - which means, when it comes to decay in families, that he will not be especially saddened by the death of the father, and will tend to celebrate the sickly autonomy of the son.

The argument that Poe's story represents an indulgence of his oedipal fantasies has been put by Freud's protégée Marie Bonaparte. Commenting on the passage from Poe's story quoted above, she says:

Thus, Poe informs us that the males of the line, from father to son, could justifiably regard themselves as the very 'sons', moulded by

it in its image, of their strange and lugubrious habitation. Since *Fatherland* and *patrimony* both, however, signify that which is owned by the father, and the father's dearest possession is the mother, of which the 'fatherland', representing the nourishing mother-earth, is but the greatly magnified extension, a similar transference has clearly taken place in regard to the patrimony of the Ushers. [Bonaparte, 1949: 238-239]

So patrilineal inheritance can be reclaimed by the Freudian as a process which has essentially to do with the mother, although the argument by which Bonaparte reclaims it looks far more like a recital of Freudian doctrine than a responsible analysis of the story. But Bonaparte's conclusion that "*The Fall of the House of Usher* is a story of retribution for infidelity to the mother" [251] does involve one key moment of engagement with the text. The atmosphere of the House, Bonaparte points out, is "[s]omething ... like the atmosphere round a corpse" [239]. Connecting this with the fact that Poe's mother had died when he was two, Bonaparte asserts that the corpse-like house of Usher is really Poe's dead mother in a symbolic disguise. "[T]he inner truth of the matter," Bonaparte claims, is "that the manor - its curse, its tarn and its 'atmosphere' - is but a transference from one who once existed: the dead mother who still survived in the unconscious memory of her son" [243].

The major flaw in this argument becomes evident when one considers the following anecdote, related by Derrida.

Méryon asked Baudelaire whether he believed 'in the real existence of this Edgar Allan Poe'; Méryon attributed Poe's tales 'to a group of highly skilled and most powerful men of letters, acutely aware of everything that was going on.' [Derrida, 1975: 103n]

In other words, Poe's tales, far from projecting neuroses exclusive to him, crystallised the obsessions of a generation. The decaying atmosphere of the so-called "Mother mansion" [240] was not a unique product of Poe's imagination: it was the defining motif of a whole body of literature. Men whose mothers were alive and well were as fond of the theme of corruption as Poe was.⁵¹

For historical reasons we considered in the previous chapter, the decadents were bent on examining the corrosive effects of time on all that had once seemed stable. Poe's use of this theme in other contexts should reassure us that there nothing intrinsically oedipal about its deployment in 'The Fall of the House of Usher'. There is his poem 'The Conqueror Worm', for example, based on the conceit

That the play is the tragedy 'Man,'
And its hero the Conqueror Worm. [1969: 23]

Or there is 'A Dream Within a Dream':

I stand amid the roar
Of a surf-tormented shore,
And I hold within my hand
Grains of golden sand -
How few! yet how they creep
Through my fingers to the deep,

⁵¹Edvard Munch, born in 1863, was another member of the decadent generation who "exulted in his tainted ancestry," according to the critic Patrick Bade. Munch "describ[ed] his mother as 'eaten away by the worm of consumption' and his father as 'tainted with a tendency towards degeneracy.' 'Sickness, insanity and death,' he wrote, were the black angels that hovered over my cradle and have followed me throughout my life'" [Bade, 1985: 228].

While I weep - while I weep!
Oh God! can I not grasp
Them with a tighter clasp?
Oh God! can I not save
One from the pitiless wave?
Is all that we see or seem
But a dream within a dream? [1969: 73]

The theme of evanescence was not, of course, a decadent invention. It is the theme of Hamlet's reflections on Yorick; it is an eternal truth on which even Oedipus himself, in *Oedipus at Colonus*, muses:

only the gods
Escape the penalties of age and death.
Time undermines everything, nothing
Can stop the inevitable process of decay.
The earth itself is eroded, the bodies
Of men wither, shrink, and die. [Sophocles, 1993: 87]

But why did this theme resurface with such a vengeance in the decadent age, becoming an obsession which was allowed to corrupt even the form of language itself? One obvious answer is that not even the gods were exempt from the process any more. If the authority of God was dead, then how obnoxious and vain were the pretensions to power of his earthly surrogate, the venerable old patriarch! Huysmans's *Against Nature* begins with an account of familial decline which graphically deflates these patriarchal pretensions:

Judging by the few portraits preserved in the Château de Lourps, the Floressas des Esseintes family had been composed in olden times of sturdy campaigners with forbidding faces. Imprisoned in old picture-frames which were scarcely wide enough for their broad shoulders, they were an alarming sight with their piercing eyes, their sweeping mustachios, and their bulging chests filling the enormous cuirasses which they wore.

These were the founders of the family; the portraits of their descendants were missing. There was, in fact, a gap in the pictorial pedigree, with only one canvas to bridge it, only one face to join the past and present. It was a strange, sly face, with pale, drawn features; the cheekbones were punctuated with cosmetic commas of rouge, the hair was plastered down and bound with a string of pearls, and the thin, painted neck emerged from the starched pleats of a ruff.

In this picture of one of the closest friends of the Duc d'Épernon and the Marquis d'O, the defects of an impoverished stock and the excess of lymph in the blood were already apparent.

Since then, the degeneration of this ancient house had clearly followed a regular course, with the men becoming progressively less manly; and over the last two hundred years, as if to complete the ruinous process, the Des Esseintes had taken to marrying among themselves, thus using up what little vigour they had left.

Now, of this family which had once been so large that it occupied nearly every domain in the Île de France and La Brie, only one descendant was still living: the Duc Jean des Esseintes, a frail young man of thirty who was anaemic and highly strung, with hollow cheeks, cold eyes of steely blue, a nose which was

turned up but straight, and thin, papery hands. [Huysmans, 1987: 17]

To an extent this reminds one of the House of Usher, but here the process of decline is described with a relish that makes its political meaning a little clearer. To dwell on the demise of past patriarchs makes a provocative point about those of the present. Their days were numbered.⁵² Their authority was subject to the same laws of process that had put paid to the rule of those ancient “sturdy campaigners” with their “sweeping mustachios”. That the baton of power had in this case been passed to the anaemic Jean only served to underline how impartial and iron-clad the law was. Besides, from the perspective of a revaluer of values like Des Esseintes, the process by which sturdy campaigners become hyper-refined neurotics was not necessarily one of degeneration. Perhaps it could even have been described as one of evolution.

Darwin and the Primal Parricide

We have already looked at the ways in which Darwinism fed into general decadent meditations about the fragility of authority. But Darwin might be said to have provided an additional and specific form of encouragement to those decadents who, like Huysmans, pursued these

⁵²“The *generation* which will take your place is now growing and will inevitably grow up,” warns Fyodor Dostoevsky in a notebook covering the years 1875 and 1876. “It is only in the fifth grade now and will inevitably grow up and come forward, *and then no trace of you will be left*” [Proffer, 1975: 111-112 - “generation” appears in italics in the original; other italics added]. This throws more light still on the political nature of the quasi-parricidal battle of the generations: for Dostoevsky, as the context of this comment makes clear, thinks of the up-and-coming generation as a generation of liberals, and of his own generation of political incumbents as anti-liberals. See Chapter 4 below for a fuller discussion of these questions in the Russian context.

meditations into the sphere of the family. For in a curious way, *The Origin of Species* sanctioned parricide.

[W]e have seen in the chapter on the struggle for existence that it is the most closely-allied forms - varieties of the same species, and species of the same genus or of related genera - which, from having nearly the same structure, constitution and habits, generally come into the severest competition with each other. Consequently, each new variety or species, during the *progress* of its formation, *will generally press hardest on its nearest kindred, and tend to exterminate them....* Many curious instances could be given showing how quickly new breeds of cattle, sheep, and other animals, and varieties of flowers, take the place of older and inferior kinds. In Yorkshire it is historically known that the ancient black cattle were displaced by the long-horns, and that these were 'swept away by the short-horns' (I quote the words of an agricultural writer) 'as if by some murderous pestilence.'" [110-11 - emphasis added]

This undermines patriarchal society's attempt to naturalise the father's hegemony over the son, and to legitimate any violence needed for its preservation. Darwin's science legitimated, or at least recognised the naturalness of, violence in the opposite direction. It was to the young, not to the old, that nature gave power. "Every one is born a king, and most people die in exile, like most kings," says Lord Illingworth, in *A Woman of No Importance* [1983a: 73].⁵³ From the point of view of

⁵³"And I was born a king ... ". laments the exiled Oedipus in *Oedipus at Colonus* [Sophocles, 1993: 67]. Whether the sorry career of Oedipus demonstrates the operation of an obscure sexual complex is a moot point, but there is another eternal truth which his life undoubtedly does illustrate: namely, the law that in matters of human authority, all things must pass. His accession to the throne demonstrates the inability of Laius, his

nature, it was the tyrannical patriarch, rather than the upstart son, who was the perverse and presumptuous one. Parricide was progress.

As natural selection acts solely by the preservation of profitable modifications, each new form will tend in a fully-stocked country to take the place of, and finally to exterminate, its own less-improved parent or other less-improved forms with which it comes into competition. Thus extinction and natural selection will, as we have seen, go hand in hand. Hence, if we look at each species as descended from some other unknown form, both the parent and all the transitional varieties will generally have been exterminated by the very process of formation and perfection of the new form. [Darwin, 1964: 148]

Civilized humans, of course, are no longer engaged in the struggle for existence. Nevertheless, Darwin provides us with a model by which parricidal impulses in civilized societies might be explained. If civilization imposes unnatural restraints on evolution, it might well become a hothouse for revolution instead. Victorian patriarchy, by unnaturally preserving the father's authority and by hampering the son's natural progression towards it, might have made a flourishing of the parricidal impulse inevitable. Perhaps that is a misreading of Darwinian theory, but in the present context that doesn't matter. What matters is not what Darwin said, but how he was read by his contemporaries. His talk of parent-species being done in by child-species could be, and was, construed as an endorsement of parricide. In *The Brothers Karamazov*,

father, to evade this law, and Oedipus's own susceptibility to it is confirmed by his disgrace and exile. Oedipus not only enacted this eternal law, he formally identified it by supplying the answer to the Riddle of the Sphinx: human beings, he saw, were the creatures that walk on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three in the evening.

for example, the free-thinking Ivan erupts during the trial of his brother: "My father has been murdered and they pretend they are horrified.... Liars! They all desire the death of their fathers. *One reptile devours another*" [Dostoevsky, 1974: 727 - emphasis added].

Like Marx then, Darwin offers us a theoretical framework by which parricide, and the impulse toward it, can be explained. The former reads parricide as revolutionary step, the latter as an evolutionary one. Their understandings of parricide differ from Freud's in the following respects. The processes to which they ascribe the impulse manifestly exist outside the world of their own theories. They allow us to acknowledge the existence of economics and politics and history, rather than obliging us to dismiss them as projections of desire. They allow us to speak frankly about power, particularly about the excessive power enjoyed by the father, and the lack of power endured by the son, under the regime of patriarchy. By construing parricide as a public or social phenomenon, they allow us to understand why parricidal tendencies might fluctuate over time, and therefore do not oblige us to tiptoe around, or to bury under desperate theoretical elaborations, the palpable truth that these tendencies surged during the *fin de siècle*.

Strangely enough, Freud did not seem to consider himself to be at odds with Darwin on the question of parricide. On at least one occasion, Freud thought their theories on the matter perfectly compatible. I am referring to the final essay of *Totem and Taboo*, in which Freud attempts a psychoanalytic development of Darwin's theory of the primal horde. We have already dealt with that essay in a slightly different context. But we must now examine it in more detail, in order to discover how Freud could possibly have believed that Darwin's conjectures about the origins of society were in harmony with the theory of the Oedipus complex.

According to Darwin's hypothesis, Freud explains, the primal horde consisted of

a violent and jealous father who keeps all the females for himself and drives away his sons as they grow up. This earliest state of society has never been an object of observation. The most primitive kind of organization that we actually come across - and one that is in force today in certain tribes - consists of bands of males; these bands are composed of members with equal rights and are subject to the restrictions of the totemic system, including inheritance through the mother. Can this form of organization have developed out of the other one? and if so along what lines? [SE, 13: 141]

Freud's answers are: yes; and along psychoanalytical lines. The first form of society was transformed into the second one by an act of oedipal violence:

One day the brothers who had been driven out came together, killed and devoured their father and so made an end of the patriarchal horde.... The violent primal father had doubtless been the feared and envied model of each one of the company of brothers: and in the act of devouring him they accomplished their identification with him, and each one of them acquired a portion of his strength. [141-142]

Fifteen pages after hypothesizing the occurrence of this primal murder, Freud is to be heard making the claim that "the beginnings of religion, morals, society and art converge in the Oedipus complex. This

is in complete agreement with the psychoanalytic finding that the same complex constitutes the nucleus of all neuroses" [156] Considering that Freud would later call this discovery "the very climax of my psychoanalytic work" [1950c: 133], it is worth examining the argument by which he reaches it, and the quality of the evidence he adduces in its favour.

To a certain extent, of course, evidential proof is not possible in this case: one does not expect Freud to produce the primal father's bones, or a murder weapon bearing the fingerprints of his sons. We cannot disprove Freud's claim that this primal act of parricide *occurred* any more than he can prove it. But Freud is making a metaphysical claim, too: he wants us to believe not only that the crime happened, but that it was an expression of the Oedipus complexes of the sons. If we are to agree that the Darwinian hypothesis has been successfully converted into a Freudian one, this is the point on which Freud must convince us. He must tell us why he believes, and why we should believe, that this hypothetical crime had sexual desire as its fundamental motive.

This would seem a tall order, given the nature of the primal horde. As we have seen, the patriarchal conditions of Freud's own age prevented him from convincingly establishing the overriding importance of sexuality in the contemporary male's resentment of his father. The grotesque patriarchy of the primal horde would seem to amplify this problem. The primal patriarch, as Freud describes him, sounds like such a nasty piece of work that it would appear to be arbitrary to single out any one form of resentment, let alone such an obscure one as repressed sexual jealousy, as the key motive for his murder. If the murder of the primal father did indeed occur, doesn't it tend to confirm the unFreudian proposition that the parricide is actuated by political forces beyond him, rather than by instinctual forces within? In the

portions of Freud's argument I have quoted so far, only one word has gone any way towards combating this impression. The word *envied*, in the phrase about the father being "the feared and envied model of each one of the company of brothers", perhaps contains a ghost of an assertion that the motive was sexual.

At this early point one naturally assumes that Freud will spend the rest of his essay elaborating on this crucial point. But then one reads passages like the following one, which suggests that Freud is not even aware that motive is the question on which his argument stands or falls.

This hypothesis, which has such a monstrous air, of the tyrannical father being overwhelmed and killed by a combination of his exiled sons, was also arrived at by [J. J.] Atkinson as a direct implication of the state of affairs in Darwin's primal horde....

Atkinson ... also pointed out that the conditions which Darwin assumed to prevail in the primal horde may easily be observed in herds of wild oxen and horses and regularly lead to the killing of the father of the herd. He further supposed that, after the father had been disposed of, the horde would be disintegrated by a bitter struggle between the victorious sons. Thus any new organization of society would be precluded: there would be 'an ever-recurring violent succession to the solitary paternal tyrant, by sons whose parricidal hands were so soon again clenched in fratricidal strife.'

[SE, 13: 142n]

"In its essential feature," Freud says of Atkinson's argument, "it is in agreement with my own" [142]. This is entirely untrue. The belief that an act of parricide *occurred* might well be the essential feature of Atkinson's argument, but it is, or ought to be, merely the starting point of

Freud's.⁵⁴ Parricide, as one has become tired of repeating, is not by definition oedipal. The essential feature of Freud's argument - the feature which makes his argument Freudian, as distinct from Atkinsonian or Darwinian or even Marxist - is the assertion that the primal parricide was a *libidinal* deed. And on this essential point Atkinson's argument is in strident *disagreement* with Freud's. For Atkinson's narrative places parricide squarely in the arena of power relations: he reads it as a response to oppression, a bestial answering of violence with violence. In particular, the empirical fact that the "conditions which Darwin assumed to prevail in the primal horde may easily be observed in herds of wild oxen and horses and regularly lead to the killing of the father of the herd" seems devastating to the Freudian

⁵⁴Indeed, Freud points out in his *Autobiographical Study* that the primal murder need not have *occurred* at all for his thesis to be right. Calling his conjectures about the primal horde more of a "vision" than a "hypothesis", he says: "Now whether we suppose that such a possibility was a historical event or not, it brings the formation of religion within the circle of the father-complex and bases it upon the ambivalence which dominates that complex" [Freud, 1950c: 124, 125].

This quotation raises a point with which a Freudian might respond to my present line of attack. Perhaps the oedipal dimension of the primal murder does not lie in its motivation (particularly if it did not even occur) so much as in the *sense of guilt* which attended the deed (or the desire to commit it). This guilt supposedly spawned the taboo against killing the totem animal, which creature was "a substitute for him, the primal father, at once feared and hated, honoured and envied.... The son's rebelliousness and his affection for his father struggled against each other through a constant series of compromises, which sought on the one hand to atone for the act of parricide and on the other to consolidate the advantages it had brought" [Freud, 1950c: 125-126]. But let us examine the ambivalence of which Freud speaks here. Initially, Freud says that the ambivalence consists in "fearing and hating" the father while at the same time "honouring and envying" him. Examining the two terms at the positive pole of the ambivalence, we find that they are not especially positive at all. "Envy", one would have thought, is scarcely the opposite of fear and hate: on the contrary, Freud insisted that envy was precisely what lay at the root of a son's negative feelings about his father. The remaining ingredient of the son's positive feelings, honour, is somewhat equivocal too, and surely not unrelated to fear. So if honour and envy were the strongest positive emotions the sons felt about their father, then one fails to see how murdering him could have left them with a sense of guilt potent enough to generate a whole system of religious belief. On the other hand, Freud does subsequently use the word 'affection' in reference to the positive pole of the ambivalence. He stops short of saying love, but affection is still roughly the kind of emotion that we might expect to find at the positive pole of a true ambivalence. This raises a different problem, though, that of implausibility. Affection for the father is 'natural' and 'normal' enough within the nuclear family, but it seems unlikely that the primal father could have inspired anything resembling pure affection in his sons.

position. All of Freud's superstitions about parricide are destroyed by it. How can we believe that the deed of the primal brothers was darkly neurotic, uniquely criminal, deeply psychological, obscurely sexual, and profoundly constitutive of religion, morals, society, when precisely analogous killings are committed on a regular basis by wild oxen? Do parricidal oxen and horses have a repressed sexual desire for their mothers? If not, then Freud is asking us to believe something even more far-fetched: that the primal brothers performed a killing which is similar in every detail to a natural animal phenomenon, but that they performed it for uniquely human reasons.

When Atkinson speaks of parricide and fratricide in the same breath, he deals another body-blow to Freud. Atkinson draws no profound distinction between the father-son struggle and the subsequent son-son struggle. Both struggles are political. When we read that a *brother* can occupy the position of "solitary paternal tyrant", we have to conclude that the concept of fatherhood, in the context of this parricide, has been drained of everything *except* its political content. The operative words, the ones which ensure that the brother will meet with violent death, are *solitary* and *tyrant*. The same principle applies to the original murder. The primal father was murdered *not because he was a father, but because he was a tyrant*. It was his political identity, not his biological one, which made his murder at the hands of his sons so inevitable.

One might think Atkinson's account of the primal parricide superior to Freud's, because it at least supplies us with an empirical reason to believe that the act occurred. But Freud finds Atkinson's effort somewhat deficient, because he had "no psychoanalytic hints to help him" [142]. This phrase seems to imply that Freud intends to flesh out Atkinson's naive narrative with a few of his own discoveries, and in particular to put him right about the motivation of the murderous sons.

In thus promising to provide a uniquely psychoanalytical illumination of the murder of this “violent and jealous father who keeps all the females for himself and drives away his sons as they grow up”, Freud seems to set himself two main tasks. First, he must demonstrate that although the primal father was in general “violent” and “jealous”, it was his sexual power, the fact that he “keeps all the females for himself”, which drove the sons to murder. Having established that, he must then show that even though the father kept *all* the females to himself, his possession of their respective mothers exercised some decisive influence.

But instead of clearing these obstacles, Freud merely presents us with formulations in which they are preserved. The sons, he says, “hated their father, who presented such a formidable obstacle to their craving for power and their sexual desires...” [143]. Far from telling us something uniquely Freudian about the nature of their hate, this only informs us that the sons’ craving for withheld power was their primary drive, of which their desire for withheld women was a mere subsidiary. So Freud inadvertently admits that from the very dawn of society, sexual relations have been enfolded within political relations. This truth was reasonably evident during Victorian times, too, but being a Victorian himself Freud managed to overlook it. Here though, in the case of the primal horde, it is far too luridly on show to be ignored, and Freud cannot possibly pretend that sexuality exists in a political vacuum. He therefore finds himself unable even to *assert* that sexual desire for the mother is the crime’s governing motive, much less to provide *proof* of the point. On the key question of the sons’ motive, he can only offer vague pronouncements in which his sexual thesis is watered down to the point of invisibility. “The cherished fruit of the crime” he says, was

"appropriation of the paternal attributes" [145].⁵⁵ Later, he says: "Each single one of the brothers who had banded together for the purpose of killing their father was inspired by a wish to become like him..." [148]. These slack speculations, it will be seen, add nothing very revolutionary to the pre-psychoanalytical gropings of Atkinson.

Freud comes closest to attaching a properly Freudian motive to the deed when he suggests that "the women whom they desired ... had been their chief motive for despatching their father" [144]. This is nothing more than a hopeful guess, as one can see by comparing it with the more tentative, and more honest, formulations about motive that Freud advances in the quotations above. But even when arbitrarily singling out sexual desire as the telling motive, Freud *still* cannot make the facts of the matter conform to pure oedipal theory. He is obliged to talk about desire for *women*, not for that particular woman whom his theory considers the primal object of desire. To say that a father who forcibly withheld *all* female flesh from his sons might have given them a sexual motive for parricide is not to say much. It certainly has no necessary link to the far more extreme notion that all sons in all circumstances harbour

⁵⁵To demote the mother so that she becomes merely one of the "paternal attributes" is a concise way of confirming that the motive for this crime lies in the field of power relations, not sexual ones. In Sophocles's play (Lines 259 and 260), Oedipus himself is similarly clear - insultingly clear, one might say - about the relative insignificance of Jocasta. She is just one of the many trappings of kingly power: "Now ... I am a king/ I enjoy Laius's title, his bed, and his wife..." [Sophocles, 1993: 15]. (In Gould's translation: "It's I who have the power that he had once, and have his bed, and a wife who shares our seed" [Sophocles, 1970: 46].) Jocasta merely comes as part of the deal: "the Thebans," as Gould explains in his 'Introduction', "had given Oedipus the hand of the widowed Queen Jocasta at the time of his elevation to the kingship" [Gould, 1970: 1].

This is not to suggest that Freud ever ventured the radically untenable claim that sexual desire for Jocasta motivated Oedipus's crime. To Freud, the myth showed deeply repressed instincts in a heavy disguise. "[T]he Oedipus Complex [is] so named because its essential substance is found in the Greek myth of King Oedipus, which has luckily been preserved for us in a version from the hand of a great dramatist. The Greek hero killed his father and married his mother" [Freud, 1949b: 88]. But the point remains that the myth actively undermines the theory by portraying union with the mother as an incidental benefit of a crime whose prime reward is power.

parricidal wishes based on a sexual desire for their mothers. Even so, Freud behaves as if this connection had been triumphantly established.

At the conclusion, then, of this exceedingly condensed inquiry, I should like to insist that its outcome shows that the beginnings of religion, morals, society and art converge in the Oedipus complex. This is in complete agreement with the psychoanalytic finding that the same complex constitutes the nucleus of all neuroses, so far as our present knowledge goes. It seems to me a most surprising discovery that the problems of social psychology, too, should prove soluble on the basis of one single concrete point - man's relation to his father. [156-157]

Amid the sound of Freud blowing his own trumpet, one can hear an even more familiar theme: a repetition of that sloppy definition of the "Oedipus complex" which has facilitated, but at the same time radically undermined, his whole argument to this point. The phrase "man's relation to his father" is used as though it were a synonym for the Oedipus complex. It isn't, of course; and yet it is. In theory, Freud defines the Oedipus complex sharply enough, but in practice he was happy to let the concept blur to the point where something which should have counted as evidence against it - a savage patriarch oppressing his sons so comprehensively that they become parricidal - can become evidence for it.

The case of the primal horde is illuminating because it raises, in a very glaring fashion, the same concerns which have made one sceptical about Freud's applications of Oedipal theory to Victorian data. As far as the data are concerned, we have found the same blatant sexism in the social structure, a sexism which clearly introduces political peculiarities

into the father-son relationship, and in particular gives the son special reasons to hate his father which do not indicate the operation of a universal sexual complex. And in Freud's approach to this data we have seen the same opportunistic reduction of the Oedipus complex to the father-hostility of sons, and the same reluctance to prove, or even to discuss, the supposedly fundamental influence of sexual love for the mother.

We shall now return to the matter of patriarchy in Freud's own day, and consider two works of *fin-de-siècle* literature which treat the theme of parricide in its historical and political context.

The Son as Revolutionary: Parricide in Oscar Wilde's *Vera*

CZAR (nervous and frightened): "Don't come too near me, boy!
Don't come too near me, I say! There is always something about
an heir to a crown unwholesome to his father. [Wilde, 1955: 544]

This neat comment on the politics of parricide comes from Oscar Wilde's first play, *Vera; Or, The Nihilists* (1880), a piece of melodramatic juvenilia set in Russia in 1800, but mainly inspired, as we shall see, by events in the Russia of Wilde's own day. The plot runs as follows. A cell of Nihilists, led by the fiery female of the title, hatch a plot to murder the Czar, Ivan. Modelled on the reactionary Paul I [see Ellmann, 1988: 116], Wilde's Czar is a paranoid tyrant with plans to quell the insurrectionary

mood of his people by imposing martial law. His son Alexis, the potential parricide to whom those lines quoted above are addressed, desperately counsels his father against such a confrontation of the masses; a program of liberal reform, he argues, would be a better way of dealing with public discontent. But the tyrannical Ivan scoffs at such suggestions. Secretly sympathetic to the Nihilists' cause, Alexis has been attending their meetings and participating in their regicidal plotting under a false identity. He and Vera are in love. When the Czar learns that his son is a Nihilist, he orders that he be put to death; but before the sentence can be carried out the Czar is himself killed, shot by a Nihilist assassin. His dying words, addressed to his son, are: "Murderer! Murderer! You did it! Murderer!" [1995: 554]. (It should be becoming apparent already that this is a play in which family politics and public politics are tightly plaited together.)

Alexis assumes the throne, thereby breaking the Nihilist's oath, which has sworn him against authority of any kind. He begins to implement his liberal agenda - but the Nihilists, being Nihilists, plan to assassinate him anyway, and Vera herself is assigned with the task. But rather than go through with it, she stabs herself - in order, she explains, to "save Russia."

It will be clear from this synopsis that *Vera* is not a very glittering example of Wilde's art. But precisely because it is unstamped by Wilde's mature aesthetic, it has an unWildean willingness to engage with, or at least to acknowledge the existence of, the political atmosphere of the age. As well as being Wilde's most overtly political play, it is also his most thorough treatment of the theme of parricide. I am not inclined to view this as a coincidence. I am inclined, rather, to read it as a confirmation of my argument that the theme of parricide was thoroughly political. Consider the lines I quoted at the beginning of this analysis: the nervous

Czar is both father and monarch, the upstart Czarevitch is both son and heir, and parricide cannot be disentangled from regicide. The play thereby seems to bear out the two main points I have been trying to make: one, that all father-son relationships of the time had a political dimension, a distinct hint of King and Heir about them; two, that the parricidal tensions present in those relationships were related to the revolutionary climate which prevailed in general politics. It was not only royal fathers who were tyrants. And princes were not the only kind of sons who stood to gain power through their father's death. This last point is nicely illustrated when Alexis calls his father a "tyrant", and in doing so strikes a chord with a non-royal, the Prime Minister. "I have been an eldest son myself. I know what it is when a father won't die to please one" [541]. The word "eldest" should make it clear that the Prime Minister is sympathising not on psychological grounds, but with reference to the factor of patrilineal inheritance.

But the consideration that the play's central relationship is at once familial and political⁵⁶ does not necessarily nullify the Freudian reading. On the contrary, a psychoanalyst would read it as a vindication of the view that political activity is nothing more than an emanation of private psychology. The Nihilists' campaign to free Mother Russia from the clutches of the tyrannical little Father has oedipal desire written all over it, the Freudian would argue, and Wilde betrays his unconscious awareness of this by placing the Czar's actual son among the revolutionaries.

Certainly the play can be interpreted along Freudian lines, but that is hardly the point. It *can* be interpreted in an infinity of ways. One can

⁵⁶A coincidence which of course obtains whenever parricide occurs in a royal family. "Tyranny links the political and the family crime," writes Seth Bernadete of *Oedipus Rex*, pointing out that the first words of Oedipus in Sophocles's play, addressed to his people, are "my children", or "O children" [Bernadete, 1966: 107].

interpret it, no doubt with some degree of plausibility, as an expression of Wilde's star sign. (He was a Libra, by the way.) So the mere fact that a Freudian reading is possible ought not to impress us, but ought simply to lead us to the question of the quality of that reading. The Freudian reading cannot be proved wrong or right, any more than the astrological interpretation can. But its pros and cons can be measured against those of other modes of interpretation, such as the historical one.

One immediate problem for the Freudian reading is that *Vera*, like so many works of decadent literature, explicitly connects the theme of parricide with uniquely contemporary political events. "I have tried in [*Vera*]," wrote Wilde, "to express within the limits of art that Titan cry of the peoples for liberty, which in the Europe of our day is threatening thrones, and making governments unstable from Spain to Russia, and from north to southern seas" [Ellmann, 1988: 116]. Wilde's adherence to contemporary reality is evident in very name of his heroine, which he borrowed from an actual Nihilist named Vera Sassoulich, who in 1878 had tried to assassinate St Petersburg's Chief of Police. "Her pistol shot", said the Pall Mall Gazette of that Vera, "rang like a bugle across Europe" [in the issue of December 14, 1889, quoted by Ellmann, 1988: 116-117]. By violently assaulting a male authority figure, she articulated a Europe-wide mood.

But what of the proposition that that revolutionary *geist* was itself merely a mass oedipal fantasy?⁵⁷ To make that glib assertion in this case is to saddle oneself with a large problem: that of explaining why oedipal fantasies from Spain to Russia, from north to southern seas, registered a spontaneous surge at this moment in history. Moreover, the consideration that Vera Sassoulich was a female assailant of a male

⁵⁷As an example of this line of thinking, see the claims Freud makes about the scientific revolution of Leonardo, quoted on page 191 above.

would seem to throw another spanner into the Freudian works. An oedipal reading of revolution, like an oedipal reading of many things, is convenient only as long as the conditions of patriarchy prevail: as long, that is, as authority figures and revolutionaries remain generally male. Had Vera Sassoulich wanted to act out her father-complex on the Chief of Police, she would presumably have written him a love letter.⁵⁸ In light of the fact that she shot him instead, we have to suspect that there was something genuinely political about her motivation, and about that of other revolutionaries like her - female *or* male.

One scarcely needs to repeat why a *fin-de-siècle* European, let alone a Russian, should have felt political discontent. While their aspirations were being pushed in one direction by enlightened political thought, they were being repressed in the other by regimes which were stale and stagnant at best, tyrannically oppressive at worst. Authority had fallen into the kind of decadence that the Italian critic Claudio Magris evokes while discussing the twilight of the Habsburg empire.

The last phase of the Habsburg civilization seemed to be poised between two contrasting poles, between the nostalgic awareness of its own decline which it endures with silent dignity, and the thoughtless lightheartedness of an operetta. The Emperor's tedious old age symbolises the Habsburg decline and epitomises the pathetic stoicism with which the monarchy of the Danube withstood the blows which rained down on it. 'I am spared absolutely nothing' Franz Josef would sigh in the face of repeated domestic and political mishaps, echoing the passive tragedy of the

⁵⁸And no, she wasn't a lesbian: her grudge against the Police Chief was born when he imprisoned her (male) lover [Ellmann, 1988: 117].

finis Austriae, and somehow investing this attitude with a dignified sense of duty. [Quoted by Zanuso, 1986: 35-36]

In *Vera*, such feebleness on the part of the ruling class strikes the Nihilists as an incitement to violence - contempt alone is a sufficient motive for revolution. "Oh, to think what stands between us and freedom in Europe!" says one of Wilde's insurgents: "a few old men, wrinkled, feeble, tottering dotards whom a boy could strangle for a ducat, or a woman stab in a night-time" [531].⁵⁹ Seeing such "dotards" in power would scarcely have reassured one that modern philosophers were wrong in deeming all authority a matter of convention only.

Those philosophies, as I have argued, had a significant influence on decadent thinking, in particular on Wilde's. "How steep the stairs within king's houses are," he once said, summing up his fascination with the precariousness of authority [quoted by Ellmann, 1988: 445].⁶⁰ Parricide in *Vera* is an extension of this Wildean theme. Hence it is folly to read Wilde's parricidal play as though it were an oasis of significance whose

⁵⁹Cf. Engels's definition of "force" as "The instrument with the aid of which social movement forces its way through and shatters the dead, fossilized political forms" [Bekerman, 1983: 64].

⁶⁰To a certain extent this preoccupation was no doubt prompted by aspects of Wilde's private life. Richard Ellmann argues that Wilde contracted syphilis as a youth [1988: 88n], and therefore spent his life in a body whose natural decay was accelerated by disease. Another story related by Ellmann has a peculiar bearing on the theme of doom in Wilde's life. In 1893, while approaching the acme of his fame, Wilde had his future told by a palm-reader named Cheiro. "The left hand in front of him, he said, promised a brilliant success, the right, impending ruin. 'The left hand is the hand of a king, but the right that of a king who will send himself into exile.' Wilde, a superstitious man ... asked 'At what date?' 'A few years from now, at about your fortieth year.' (He was then thirty-eight.) Without another word Wilde left the party.

"The word that triggered his response may have been 'king'. It was associated in his mind from Portora [i.e. Wilde's school] with Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*. Wilde's sense of being lucky did not prevent his thinking of himself as unlucky, too. In *De Profundis* he repeatedly used the word 'doom' as opposed to mere 'destiny,' and he pointed to 'the note of doom that like a purple thread runs through the gold cloth of *Dorian Gray*.' Wilde was too good a classicist not to piece together from the plays of Aeschylus and Euripides and the *Iliad*, the stages of doom for Agamemnon. Prosperous, he became blasé, the man who has everything, and later Wilde would invoke another rule and speak of 'my Neronian hours, rich, profligate, cynical, materialistic'" [Ellmann, 1988: 360, 361].

sole wellspring was his unconscious. In fact the play is part of a thematic river which flows through Wilde's work as a whole, whose source lies beyond Wilde and beyond decadent literature, somewhere in the history that shaped them both.

Wilde's interest in the fragility of authority is evident as early as his *College Notebooks*, in which he quotes David Hume: "Force is always on the side of the Governed: all governments rest ultimately on opinion" [164].⁶¹ When uttered by a decadent, this ceases to be a comment about the strength of the people, and refers entirely to the brittleness of authority. It sanctions the kind of audacious inversions of the power structure that the decadents liked to perpetrate, as in Lord Illingworth's comment in *An Ideal Husband*. "The tyranny of the weak over the strong is the only tyranny that lasts" [1983b: 77].

In *Vera*, this modern scepticism of authority can be detected when Alexis, having been elevated to the throne, is moved to meditate on the essence of power - and to conclude that it has none.

Before my father's hideous shriek of death had died in my ears I found this crown on my head, the purple robe around me, and heard myself called a king.... What subtle potency lies hidden in this gaudy bauble, the crown, that makes one feel like a god when one wears it? To hold in one's hand this little fiery-coloured world, to reach out one's arm to earth's uttermost limit, to girdle

⁶¹Cf. Tolstoy, in his *Diaries* (1897): "Ultimately it is those people who are the victims of oppression, i.e. those people who obey the law of non-resistance, who always rule. So women seek rights, but it is they who rule, just because they are the ones subjected to force - were, and still are. Institutions are in the power of men, but public opinion is in the power of women. And public opinion is a million times stronger than any laws and armies. The proof of the fact that public opinion is in the hands of women is that not only is the organization of houses and food determined by women ... but the success of works of art and of books, even the appointment of rulers, is determined by public opinion, and public opinion is determined by women. It was well said by somebody that men need to seek emancipation from women, and not the other way round" [Tolstoy, 1994: 321].

the seas with one's galley; to make the land a highway for one's hosts; this is to wear a crown! to wear a crown! The meanest serf in Russia who is loved is better crowned than I. How love outweighs the balance.... [572]

Authority isn't tangible: only its trappings and its trinkets are. Beneath their impressive surface lies a terrifying void. This is an interesting usage of a familiar decadent tactic, that of emphasizing the surface of something until we are persuaded that nothing exists beneath it. Another place in which Wilde interrogates the authority of a monarch in this way is his fairy story 'The Young King'. In that story, the Chamberlain urges the youngster to "put on this fair robe, and set this crown upon thy head. For how shall the people know thou art a king, if thou hast not a king's raiment?" [1988: 231]. Raiments might be mistaken for a mere representation of authority, but really they are its very essence. Appearance is the only reality. If you don't look like a king, the people will not know you are a king - and if the people do not know you are a king, then you are not one, for all authority rests on opinion.

A few items of clothing and the good will of the people: that is all there is to power, according to the sceptical Wilde. Consequently, his works repeatedly represent power as something one would rather *not* have, so flimsy are its foundations. Glory is always temporary in Wilde, a mere prelude to decline. "There is a fatality about all physical and intellectual distinction," says Basil Hallward, painter of the portrait of Dorian Gray:

the sort of fatality that seems to dog through history the faltering steps of kings. It is better not to be different from one's fellows. The ugly and the stupid have the best of it in this world.... If

they know nothing of victory, they are at least spared the knowledge of defeat. They live as we all should live, undisturbed, indifferent, and without disquiet. [Wilde, 1988: 19]

So says the man who will wind up being murdered by his own metaphorical son, the picture-perfect Dorian Gray.

In 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism', Wilde applies this subversive idea to the reign of Julius Caesar:

Caesar, says Mommsen, was the complete and perfect man. But how tragically insecure was Caesar! *Wherever there is a man who exercises authority, there is a man who resists authority.* Caesar was very perfect, but his perfection travelled by too dangerous a road. [1970c: 236 - emphasis added]

Look at the italicised sentence. Remember the climate of oppression and insurrection in which Wilde wrote it; and consider that only seven years later Freud would produce his theory of the Oedipus complex, which has all sons resisting all fathers for supposedly sexual reasons.

In Wilde's *Salomé*, Caesar makes a peripheral appearance, as the author of a letter explaining to Herod why he is unable to come to Judea. Among other excuses, he cites "reasons of State. He who leaves Rome loses Rome" [Wilde, 1988: 564]. Before long, Herod will be getting a more personal taste of the perils of authority. No sooner has he declared that "I have never been so happy. There is nothing in the world that can mar my happiness," than he is treated to the following prophecy of Jokanaan:

He shall be seated on this throne. He shall be clothed in scarlet and purple. In his hand he shall bear a golden cup full of his

blasphemies. And the angel of the Lord shall smite him. He shall be eaten of worms. [1988: 567]

By the end of the play, there can be little doubt about which King the prophecy refers to. Herod is still alive, but his authority, his power, is already food for worms. "Surely some terrible thing will befall," he moans.

.... [P]ut out the torches. I will not look at things, I will not suffer things to look at me. Put out the torches! Hide the moon! Hide the stars! Let us hide ourselves in our palace, Herodias. I begin to be afraid.⁶² [1988: 574]

The Czar in *Vera* also finds having power a frightening business, and his panicky speeches have the same jerky rhythms as Herod's. "Who is that man over there?" demands the jumpy Czar.

I don't know him. What is he doing? Is he a conspirator? Have you searched him? Give him till tomorrow to confess, then hang him! - hang him! ... [To his Prime Minister:] Why do you startle me like that?... (*Watches the courtiers nervously*). Why are you clattering your sword, sir? Take it off. I shall have no man wear a

⁶²The real Herod was similarly uptight about the stability of his reign, and naturally his paranoia was at its sharpest in relation to his sons. Since Herod had at least ten wives and more than fifteen children, it was unclear who his heir would be. He was plagued by visions in which one of his sons stood over him with a drawn sword. He ended up putting no fewer than three of his sons to death, out of fear that they were conspiring against him. Speaking at the trial of one of them, Herod said: "Since some evil genius desolates my house and makes my dearest one rise against me one by one, I shall indeed lament my cruel fate and inwardly grieve for my loneliness. But I will let no one escape who thirsts for my blood, not even if judgement finds *every one* of my children guilty." "I would rather be Herod's pig," Augustus once commented, "than his son" [Grant, 1971: 202, 195 and *passim*.].

sword in my presence (*looking at CZAREVITCH*), least of all my son. [Wilde, 1995: 544]

In the decadent political climate, the appropriate mental state for a monarch was one of deep paranoia. Wilde's Czar again:

Vera, the Nihilist, in Moscow! O God, were it not better to die at once the dog's death they plot for me than to live as I live now! Never to sleep, or, if I do, to dream such horrid dreams that hell itself were peace when matched with them. To trust none but those I have bought, to buy none worth trusting! To see a traitor in every smile, poison in every dish, a dagger in every hand! To lie awake at night, listening from hour to hour for the stealthy creeping of the murderer, for the laying of the damned mine! You are all spies! You are all spies! You worst of all - you, my own son! [548]

A crucial thing happens at the end of both of these speeches. The Czar's fear of his son is identified as a part - the worst part, but still a part - of his fear of his subjects in general. Relatives are an aggravated form of the public, and the threat posed by the son is merely an aggravated version of the threat posed by the masses. An heir is a walking reminder of the mortality of a King's rule at the best of times: and these are emphatically not the best of times for this Czar, or perhaps for any ruler, fictional or real.

Wilde's play is meticulous in establishing the parallels and interconnections between the father's squabble with his son and the monarch's squabble with his subjects. The Nihilists recite an oath in which they vow, among other things, "to set father against son, and

husband against wife..." [526].⁶³ Article Five of the Nihilists' Code of Revolution states that "The family as subversive of true socialistic and communal unity is to be annihilated" [558]. The family as an instrument of State oppression: again the father's oppression of his son, and the son's resentment, are contextualised within a wider politics. The Czar himself is painfully aware of the link:

My father gave me the Iron Cross of Valour. Oh, could he see me now, with this coward's livery ever in my cheek! (Sinks into his chair). I never knew any love when I was a boy. I was ruled by terror myself, how else should I rule now? [Wilde, 1995: 548]

Is the Czar alluding to his rule of terror over his people, or over his son? The answer is, both. Just as he has oppressed the masses, so he has brought his son up according to a domestic version of martial law, keeping him imprisoned in the palace under guard. "An excellent training to make him a tyrant in his turn," muses one of the Nihilists about this rearing technique [527]. But the training makes the Czarevitch grow up to be something else instead: a Nihilist, a parricide. Instead of passing the violence on down the line, as his father did, Alexis reflects it, justly, on the oppressor himself. There is a subtle indication that the Czar recognises his own culpability for both of the types of uprising with which he is faced. "The people! The people! A tiger which I have let loose on myself; but I will fight with it to the death" [549], is his response to the public's revolt. Complaining about the parricidal threat, he uses a curiously similar formulation: "A plague on all sons, I say! There should

⁶³Ellmann points out [1988: 117] that Wilde "borrowed the Nihilists' oath from 'The Catechism of a Revolutionary' by S. C. Nechayev and Mikhail Bakunin."

be no more marriages in Russia when one can breed such Serpents⁶⁴ as you are!" [553]. So the patriarch has bred the animal response of parricide, just as the tyrant has bred public revolution.

Having lost the good will of the people, and of his son, the Czar lavishly confirms the hollowness of his power by appealing to the ludicrously superficial fact that he is still their father *by name*. "What did you say, boy? tyranny! tyranny! Am I a tyrant? I'm not. I love the people. I'm their father. *I'm called so in every official proclamation*" [545 - emphasis added]. The Nihilists, for their part, find this language offensively hollow. "The father of his people," scoffs one of them, and Vera adds: "Ay! a father whose name shall not be hallowed, whose kingdom shall change to a republic, whose trespasses shall not be forgiven him, because he has robbed us of our daily bread; with whom is neither right, nor glory, now or for ever" [545].

This is an important speech. The little Father is compared with the heavenly father - which links political scepticism with religious scepticism - and both of them are likened to the literal father, the footsoldier of patriarchy who enforces its rules (or endures their decomposition) in the battlefield of the family. Religious scepticism - political scepticism - parricide. What applied to God the Father and to the Little Father applied just as surely to the father as such. His power was merely conventional, too; it only depended on the good-will of the ruled. In that climate fathers had to be on their toes, had to prove themselves worthy of the name. This point is made during the defence of Mitya Karamazov, who is on trial for parricide: "such a father as the murdered old Karamazov," says Mitya's attorney, "cannot and does not deserve to

⁶⁴Used in this connection, the word "serpent" echoes the words of another foolish father plagued by filial insurrection: King Lear's "How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is/ To have a thankless child".

be called a father. Love for the father that is not justified by the father is an absurdity, an impossibility" [Dostoevsky, 1992: 788].⁶⁵

The climate of scepticism, then, carried a warning for fathers. Respect from superstitious fear, as Tolstoy perceived, was over. It was time for kings and for fathers to earn respect, to be respectable - or to live with the consequences, which might well mean dying from them. "What root should there be of discontent among the people but tyranny and injustice amongst their rulers?" [545], explains Wilde's Alexis, the tyrant's son. His father proves the point right by ignoring it; he imposes martial law instead, and only succeeds in whipping up discontent to a murderous pitch. "It [martial law] is the death-warrant of liberty in Russia," declares the president of the Nihilists. "Or the signal for revolution," replies Vera - who means, in effect, that it is the death-warrant of the Czar [530].

So the Czar, in trying to retard the decadence of his power with more oppression, only succeeds in speeding the decadence up. Wilde's Prime Minister sums the situation up nicely: "Good kings," he says, "are the only dangerous enemies that modern democracy has" [560]. This principle is a modern version of a proverb which Freud himself once quoted: "Harsh rulers have short reigns".⁶⁶ It is a pity that Freud did not ask himself how good this proverb might have been at explaining the kind of politics that he insisted on calling "oedipal". Victorian fathers

⁶⁵Sophocles's Electra protests that her mother is "in name, but nothing else, a mother" [Sophocles, 1977: 105]. "Mother!" she scoffs at an earlier point in the play:

more like a jailer, with the slavery
You put upon me, the insults I have to bear
From you and your partner.... [1977: 86]

⁶⁶Freud quotes the proverb during the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), while discussing character types and their durability: "There is no justification for the fear that trends which set in with the greatest violence in childhood will permanently dominate the adult character; it is just as likely that they will disappear and make way for an opposite tendency. ('Harsh rulers have short reigns')" [1983a: 167].

were harsh rulers; perhaps that harshness had something, or everything, to do with the “parricidal” leanings of their sons. In order to test this proposition further, let us now turn to another harsh ruler with a short reign: Fyodor Karamazov, perhaps the most famous victim of parricide in all literature.

FOUR

“A sign of the times”: Parricide in *The Brothers Karamazov*

On March 30, 1878, Dostoevsky attended the trial of Vera Zasulich, accused of firing a shot at General Trepov, the governor of the Petersburg district, who had ordered a political prisoner to be flogged. She was acquitted by the jury and Dostoevsky witnessed the great ovation given her by a large crowd. This turned him against trial by jury, of which he had previously approved, and led him to treat it, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, as a farce. (David Magarshack, *Dostoevsky* [1962: 471])

This is the same Vera Zasulich who would lend her name, as well as her politics, to the fiery heroine of Wilde's first play. What are we to make of this curious coincidence? Why does the name of this feisty assassin come up in connection with Wilde's first major work and with Dostoevsky's last one, both of which were completed in 1880, and both of which had an act of parricide at the centre of their drama?

At first glance, what we have here is a vivid but perhaps trivial vindication of the argument that both works had their roots in history. But it was not just in the trivial sense that she was a real person that Vera Sassoulitch represented history. The shot of her pistol, we will recall, “rang like a bugle across Europe”, because it reified the turbulent mood of the time. And clearly it was this symbolic dimension of Vera that mattered to Wilde and Dostoevsky. For both writers, she possessed a significance which transcended the local specifics of her deed. For Wilde

she represented the people's healthy thirst for liberty, for Dostoevsky the pernicious anarchism of progressive politics. But while they had differing attitudes toward the social upheaval that Vera stood for, Wilde and Dostoevsky felt the force of that tumult with comparable intensity - and both produced works in which it finds its ultimate expression in an act of parricide.

If Wilde's slight *Vera* only sketches the connections between the theme of parricide and the conditions of the age, then *The Brothers Karamazov* gives us the broad canvas in living colour. It is fitting that Wilde's intuitions about the social significance of parricide should have been echoed, on so much more grand a scale, by a Russian: Russia was, after all, notoriously a crucible for the social tendencies that Wilde detected beneath the deed (or notion) of parricide. Tyranny and insurrection,¹ slavery and freedom, the death of God - for a Russian these were not mere ideas to be toyed with, but issues of supreme urgency.² *The Brothers Karamazov* was a wilfully contemporary novel, and no Freudian could possibly deny that Dostoevsky was, at least at the level of secondary revision, determined to deal with these pressing social questions. But I reject the view that the novel's engagement with history was *only* a secondary revision, a mere cloak of contemporaneity worn by the timeless, oedipally-generated theme of parricide. I believe, on the

¹Introducing the Russian edition of *The Communist Manifesto* in 1882, Marx and Engels observed that "During the Revolution of 1848-49 ... the Tsar was proclaimed the chief of European reaction. Today he is a prisoner of war of the revolution ... and Russia forms the *vanguard of revolutionary action in Europe*" [57 - emphasis added].

²"How have Russian boys handled things up to now?" says Ivan to Alyosha in Dostoevsky's novel. "Take, for instance, some stinking local tavern. They meet there and settle down in a corner. They've never seen each other before in their whole lives, and when they walk out of the tavern, they won't see each other again for forty years. Well, then, what are they going to argue about, seizing this moment in the tavern? About none other than the universal questions: is there a God, is there immortality? And those who do not believe in God, well, they will talk about socialism and anarchism, about transforming the whole of mankind according to a new order, but it's the same damned thing, the questions are all the same, only from the other end. And many, many of the most original Russian boys do nothing but talk about the eternal questions, now, in our time" [Dostoevsky, 1992: 234].

contrary, that the theme of parricide grew out of Dostoevsky's historical agenda, and that he used the murder of a father by his son as a metaphor for his anxieties about Europe, and in particular Russia. What Freud saw as the oedipal novel *par excellence* is actually, I will argue, the demonstration *par excellence* of the historicity of the theme of parricide in *fin-de-siècle* literature.

In challenging the Freudian reduction of *The Brothers Karamazov*, we have at our disposal a resource which we did not possess in the case of *Vera* - we have an oedipal reading of the text conducted by Freud himself. Not that 'Dostoevsky and Parricide', the famous paper of 1928, devotes itself exclusively, or even primarily, to Dostoevsky's novel. Freud's reflections about the novel are in fact rather brief, and are sandwiched between a lengthy psychoanalysis of Dostoevsky's epilepsy, and a briefer discussion of his compulsive gambling. The latter section of Freud's paper is irrelevant to the present inquiry. But the analysis of Dostoevsky's epilepsy is important, because it provides Freud with "evidence" of the novelist's private wish to kill his father - evidence which paves the way for Freud's attempt to read the theme of parricide in *The Brothers Karamazov* as an expression of Dostoevsky's unconscious guilt.

According to Freud, Dostoevsky's epilepsy - or "so-called epilepsy", as he is impertinent enough to dub it [Freud, 1950f: 231] - was of an hysterical, rather than an organic, character. It was fuelled by the vast fund of oedipal guilt incurred by the novelist when, in 1839, his father was murdered. Dostoevsky was seventeen at the time of this traumatic event.³ Prior to it, Freud contends, Dostoevsky had wished unconsciously for his father's death, and had experienced guilt in the form of mysterious blackouts. "His early symptom of death-like seizures

³For a full discussion of the murder, see page 326 below.

can ... be understood as a father-identification on the part of his ego, permitted by his superego as a punishment. 'You wanted to kill your father in order to be your father yourself. Now you *are* your father, but a dead father'" [1950f: 232]. When this wished-for death actually occurred, Dostoevsky's guilt soared, and his seizures of self-punishment became full-blown epileptic fits.

If it proved to be the case that Dostoevsky was free from his seizures in Siberia, that would merely substantiate the view that his seizures were his punishment. He did not need them any longer when he was being punished in another way. But that cannot be proved. Rather does this necessity for punishment on the part of Dostoevsky's mental economy explain the fact that he passed unbroken through these years of misery and humiliation. Dostoevsky's condemnation as a political prisoner was unjust and he must have known it, but he accepted the undeserved punishment at the hands of the Little Father, the Tsar, as a substitute for the punishment he deserved for his sin against his real father. Instead of punishing himself, he got himself punished by his father's deputy. [1950f: 233]

Freud's argument, as usual, consists almost exclusively of the kind of airy speculations that are as hard to disprove as they are to prove. But he does adduce, as a kind of launching-pad for his assertions, a handful of hard biographical facts about Dostoevsky. Recent scholarship suggests that most of these 'facts' are either not particularly hard or not facts at all. Joseph Frank, in an article appended to the first volume of his *Dostoevsky* [Frank, 1976: pp 379-391], demonstrates that Freud's analysis of Dostoevsky's illness is premised at nearly all of its key points on

erroneous or gravely misinterpreted data. Moreover, there is one fact which, although crucially pertinent to the matter, is absent from Freud's account: the fact that Dostoevsky's son Alexey died of a massive epileptic fit. The boy's death offers us a strong indication, as Frank points out, that "epilepsy ran in Dostoevsky's family, and that the child had probably inherited it from his father. This creates a strong presumption that Dostoevsky's epilepsy was organic in origin and not primarily hysterical" [Frank, 1976: 382].⁴ If Dostoevsky's epilepsy was organic, then all of Freud's speculations about the nature of Dostoevsky's hysteria are rendered irrelevant.

But let us assume for a moment that Freud was right to think of Dostoevsky's illness as psychosomatic. Even if we grant Freud that, he is still obliged to prove his additional contentions about the nature of that hysteria. He suggests that the disease was activated by the death of Dostoevsky's father, and was therefore a mode of oedipal self-punishment. "It would be very much to the point," Freud says on this question, "if it could be established that they [i.e. the fits] ceased completely during his exile in Siberia" - that is, when Dostoevsky was enjoying surrogate punishment at the hands of the Little Father [Freud, 1950f: 228]. Frank demonstrates, however, that the opposite is the case: "it is regrettably awkward for Freud's whole thesis that, according to *all* the

⁴James L. Rice, in his book *Dostoevsky and the Healing Art*, points out that Freud had encountered, and had chosen to ignore, other evidence pointing to the organic nature of Dostoevsky's epilepsy. In the article by Fülöp-Miller on which Freud's essay heavily drew, Rice explains, "[s]eizure records quoted from Dostoevsky's notebooks give specifically symptomatic counter-indications of hysteria: post-ictal depression, disorientation, and incapacity; self-inflicted severe psychical damage; and seizures occurring in sleep.... The classic works by Janet on Hysteria (1905, 1920) point to precisely the known symptoms of Dostoevsky (seizures in sleep and depressive aftermath) as among the *most* convincing arguments against hysteria and for organic or genuine epilepsy in differential diagnosis. Following hysterical seizures, on the contrary, the patient's mood sharply improves, and hysteria is seldom privately experienced, let alone in sleep. These signals should have helped Freud to avoid his mistaken diagnostic hypothesis" [Rice, 1985: 219-220].

evidence *except* the family tradition,⁵ Dostoevsky's epilepsy *began* in Siberia; the only possible proof of Freud's argument turns out to be a counter-proof" [Frank, 1976: 389 - emphasis in original]. As for the "early symptom of death-like seizures" of which Freud makes so much: "there is," says Frank, "no evidence whatever relating such symptoms to Dostoevsky's childhood" [387]. Frank's rigorous examination of the data leads him, justifiably enough, to the devastating conclusion that "the case history [Freud] constructed in the effort to 'explain' [Dostoevsky] in psychoanalytical terms is purely fictitious" [28].

What of Freud's attempt to explain Dostoevsky's *novel* in psychoanalytical terms? To the extent that it is bound up with his discredited notions about Dostoevsky's epilepsy, Freud's reading of the novel begins to look shaky. Take, for example, Freud's opinion that it is "remarkable" that Smerdyakov, the parricide in Dostoevsky's novel, happens to be an epileptic [1950f: 236]. This circumstance is "remarkable" only if one believes that Dostoevsky's own epilepsy had a parricidal meaning. It looks considerably less suggestive once one has embraced the overwhelming evidence that Dostoevsky's illness was not even hysterical, let alone parricidal.

On the other hand, much of what Freud has to say about the novel relies only on the general theory of the Oedipus complex, and therefore cannot be dismissed simply because Freud was wrong about the novelist's medical condition. This is certainly true of the paragraph which ushers in his discussion of the book:

⁵Freud quotes a tradition according to which Dostoevsky's fits dated back to his "earliest youth" [Freud, 1950f: 227n]. That story, Frank explains, originated with Dostoevsky's second wife, and was in all probability an "innocent falsification" which "was destined to have an astonishing career when it became the centre of the case-history which Freud constructed, out of such fragmentary and questionable data, to deal with the enigma of Dostoevsky" [Frank, 1976: 391].

It can scarcely be owing to chance that three of the masterpieces of the literature of all time - the *Oedipus Rex* of Sophocles, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* - should all deal with the same subject, parricide. In all three, moreover, the motive of the deed, sexual rivalry for a woman, is laid bare. [Freud, 1950f: 235]

This brief passage contains two timely reminders of the slackness of Freud's thinking when it came to matters parricidal. First, consider Freud's lumping together of *Karamazov* and *Hamlet* as texts whose "subject" is parricide. Is *Hamlet* really about parricide? This suggestion would have come as news to its author, and indeed to any pre-Freudian reader of the play. The truth is that *Hamlet* is only about parricide once it has been subjected to a Freudian decoding - or, to be less charitable, a Freudian rewriting.⁶ *Karamazov*, on the other hand, is manifestly, transparently, *consciously* about parricide. Even if you accept the Freudian notion that *Hamlet* is about parricide, then surely you must stipulate that it is not about parricide in the same way that *Karamazov* is about parricide. The two works engage with the Oedipus complex from opposite ends.

To put it another way, the parricidal content of *Hamlet* emerges only at the *conclusion* of a Freudian reading; whereas the parricidal content of *Karamazov* is, or ought to be, merely the starting-point of the Freudian reading - or of any reading, for that matter. The argument must turn on what *kind* of parricide we are dealing with; Freud's burden is to

⁶So when he says that it can "scarcely be owing to chance" that all three of these narratives are about parricide, Freud is inadvertently right. *Hamlet* is about parricide owing to Freud. But what Freud wants to suggest, of course, is that what we have here is a coincidence so vast that it amounts to a proof of the Oedipus theory. Freud's argument is perfectly circular: he would like us to accept that these works of literature, by echoing oedipal theory, confirm its validity; and yet they must first be decoded with the aid of that very theory before they can be seen to echo it.

establish that it is sexually-driven, oedipal.⁷ But the fact that Freud immediately places the actual parricide in *The Brothers Karamazov* on a par with the reconstructed psychological parricide in *Hamlet* indicates that he is unlikely to deal with this burden scrupulously. It suggests that Freud considers *Karamazov* a self-evidently oedipal text simply because it deals with the subject of parricide. When Freud laconically adds that “[i]n all three, moreover, the motive of the deed, sexual rivalry for a woman, is laid bare,” his reference to “*the* motive of the deed” carries the subtle suggestion that parricide can have no other motive than sexual rivalry, and the word “moreover” implies that evidence of this sexual rivalry is somewhat superfluous - that sexuality does not *have* to be laid bare in order to be considered present. So the very point that Freud must establish is simply taken for granted from the very beginning, via the assumption that parricide is by definition oedipal. (The idea that this assumption might be justified by some rigorous, painstaking, empirical groundwork at some earlier point in Freud’s writings is, as we have seen, without foundation.) This outrageous corner-cutting receives its classic expression in the memoirs of Freud’s patient and protégé, the Wolf Man: “In *The Brothers Karamazov* Dostoevsky deals with *patricide*, that is, with the *Oedipus complex*” [Gardiner, 1971: 145 - emphasis added]. Although Freud never spelt things out that crudely, such a formula is clearly implicit in his essay on Dostoevsky. Only when blinkered by such a preconception could one possibly assert that sexual rivalry is “laid bare” as *the* motive for the murder of Fyodor Karamazov.

What, then, is the motive? It is history. Dostoevsky, I will argue, presents us with an act of parricide which is motivated by historical forces. When the prosecutor of Dmitri Karamazov calls the murder a

⁷A burden which looks considerably heavier when we consider the fact that *The Brothers Karamazov* was written in an era in which parricide was so thoroughly explicable in social terms.

“sig[n] of the times” [Dostoevsky, 1992: 693], he is articulating a belief which saturates the novel. Parricide is presented to us as the epitome of the modern, the abominable apotheosis of social disintegration. To establish this point is to do more than merely debunk Freud’s reading of the novel. It is to raise the possibility that the novel is capable of reading Freud. By furnishing social and historical explanations of phenomena that Freud took to be universal, *The Brothers Karamazov* might well condemn the theory of the Oedipus complex as a product of its time.

History in *The Brothers Karamazov*

A good way to start examining the profoundly historical character of Dostoevsky’s novel is to consider *The Diary of a Writer*, the rambling public journal in which Dostoevsky aired his social and political opinions between 1873 and 1881. Edward Wasiolek, the editor of Dostoevsky’s *Notebooks for The Brothers Karamazov*, says of the *Diary* that it “reads like the historical correlative of *The Brothers Karamazov*, yet it seems to have been written so that the history did not have to be incorporated in the novel itself” [Wasiolek, 1971: 9]. The novel, says Wasiolek, was written by “a Dostoevsky intent upon eliminating topical references” [10]; it is “as if Dostoevsky wanted to distance the topical and invite the universal” [9]. Wasiolek far overstates the case, I think, when he suggests that Dostoevsky did not incorporate history into his novel: surely its presence is palpable on nearly every page. But the drift of his argument is sound: there is more - even more - history behind the novel than there is in it. The *Diary*, and the *Notebooks*, demonstrate that *Karamazov* derived its “universal” themes from local and historically-

specific concerns. The novel therefore evolved according to a process exactly the opposite of that proposed by Freud, who viewed contemporary references as a mere garnish of irrelevancies, which the analyst should sweep away in order to reveal the universal myth beneath.

Of special interest to us here is the insight the *Diary* gives us into the connections between the theme of parricide and Dostoevsky's anxieties about the age. In 1877, the year in which he commenced work on *Karamazov*, Dostoevsky wrote:

from hour to hour Europe is changing from what she used to be recently - from what she was only six months ago - so that one cannot even vouch three months ahead for her further immutability. The point is that we are on the eve of the greatest and most violent events and revolutions in Europe - and this *without exaggeration....* Yes, immense cataclysms are awaiting Europe, perturbations which the human mind refuses to believe....
[Dostoevsky, 1954: 908]

This sense of impending disaster will be familiar to the reader of *The Brothers Karamazov*. The opening pages of the novel are strewn with tantalising references to an impending "catastrophe". In Book V, Alyosha is visited by a sense of foreboding which closely resembles Dostoevsky's fears about European cataclysm: "with each hour the conviction kept growing in Alyosha's mind that an inevitable, terrible catastrophe was about to occur. What precisely the catastrophe consisted in ... he himself would perhaps have been unable to define" [Dostoevsky, 1992: 222].

This feeling compels Alyosha to pay a visit to his brother Dmitri, who has been making increasingly less vague suggestions that he wants

to kill his father. In the very near future their father will indeed be murdered, and Dmitri will be charged with the crime. So the "terrible catastrophe" feared by Alyosha turns out to be the crime of parricide. This creates the strong impression that parricide in the novel functions as a kind of objective correlative of the fears expressed by Dostoevsky in the *Diary*. Parricide was a metaphor for the great public catastrophe that he feared - a reasonable fear, in light of what did end up happening in Russia - was imminent.⁸ After all, the novel makes no secret of the fact that the Karamazovs are meant to constitute a microcosm of a nation held to be in a bad way,⁹ and it stands to reason that the act of violence that rends the family should have a commensurate symbolic weight. "[A] great number of our Russian, our national, criminal cases bear witness precisely to something universal, to some general malaise that has taken root among us," says Dmitri's prosecutor, expanding on his point that the defendant's crime is a sign of the times. In such offences, he says, one can see "the whole tragic topsy-turveydom of the present moment" [694].

In an 1876 chapter of the *Diary* entitled 'Segregation', Dostoevsky attempts to put his finger on the nature of the contemporary malaise.

Verily, I keep thinking that we have reached an epoch of some universal 'segregation.' Everybody segregates himself, keeps aloof from others.... Former ties are being severed without regret and everybody acts by himself.... If he doesn't act, he wishes he could act.... Meanwhile, in almost nothing is there moral accord:

⁸In Mark's gospel, Christ prophesies a time of tribulation in which parricide will figure prominently: "Now the brother shall betray the brother to death, and the father the son; and children shall rise up against their parents, and shall cause them to be put to death" (13:12).

⁹"[C]ertain basic, general elements of our modern-day educated society shine through, as it were, in the picture of this nice little family," sneers the Prosecutor during Dmitri's trial [Dostoevsky, 1992: 695].

everything has been, or is being, broken up, and not even into groups but into units.... [T]he 'segregation' of units and the extreme, so to speak, chemical decomposition of our society into its component parts, which has occurred suddenly in our time.... [N]owadays everybody is 'on his own and by himself'.... 'And in Europe' - why, everywhere - isn't it the same? Haven't all these cohesive forces, which we had so trusted, been converted into a sad mirage? Isn't their decomposition and segregation even worse than ours?' These are questions which cannot be evaded by a Russian.... [Dostoevsky, 1954: 245, 249, 250]

Decomposition, segregation, the severing of former ties - this social vision sounds awfully familiar. It is the vision of the decadents. But it is important to stress that while Dostoevsky shared the decadent vision, his *sensibility* was in bitter opposition to the decadent one. What Dostoevsky condemned as "segregation", the decadents celebrated: Wilde in the name of "individualism", Pater of "relativism", Remy de Gourmont of "*l'idealisme*", Valery Larbaud of "the penetration of the self." *The Brothers Karamazov*, while clearly not a piece of decadent art, was just as clearly a reaction to precisely the same social trends that prompted the art of the decadents. Indeed the Karamazov family may be seen to represent, among other things, Dostoevsky's condemnation of the decadent attitude. "I'm a Karamazov," says Mitya at one point: "when I fall into the abyss, I go straight into it, head down and heels up, and I'm even pleased that I'm falling in just such a humiliating position, and for me I find it beautiful" [Dostoevsky, 1992: 107].

Dostoevsky's anxieties about "segregation" come to the surface of *The Brothers Karamazov* at several key points, finding their way into the

mouths of some disparate characters. The Mysterious Visitor encountered by the young Zosima in Book Six speaks of the

human isolation which is now reigning everywhere, especially in our age.... For everyone now strives most of all to separate his person, wishing to experience the fullness of life within himself, and yet what comes of all his efforts is not the fullness of life but full suicide, for instead of the fullness of self-definition, they fall into complete isolation. For all men in our age are separated into units, each seeks seclusion in his own hole, each withdraws from others, hides himself, and hides what he has, and ends by pushing himself away from people and pushing people away from himself.
[303]

There is an implicit violence in this clashing of social units, and the Mysterious Visitor knows this violence first-hand. For he is himself a murderer: fourteen years earlier he had stabbed a woman to death, and successfully framed a drunken servant for the deed.¹⁰

Zosima, glossing the story of the stranger, is even more emphatic about the relationship between social decay and murder:

The world has proclaimed freedom, especially of late, but what do we see in this freedom of theirs: only slavery and suicide! For the world says: 'You have needs, therefore satisfy them, for you have the same rights as the noblest and richest men. Do not be afraid to satisfy them, but even increase them' - this is the current teaching of the world. And in this they see freedom. But what comes of this right to increase one's needs? For the rich, *isolation and*

¹⁰See note 28 below.

spiritual suicide; for the poor, *envy and murder*, for they have been given rights, but they have not yet been shown any way of satisfying their needs. We are assured that the world is becoming more and more united, is being formed into brotherly communion, by the shortening of distances, by the transmitting of thoughts through the air. Alas, do not believe in such a union of people. Taking freedom to mean the increase and prompt satisfaction of needs, they distort their own nature, for they generate many meaningless and foolish desires, habits, and the most absurd fancies in themselves. They live only for mutual envy, for pleasure-seeking and self-display. To have dinners, horses, carriages, rank, and slaves to serve them is now considered such a necessity that for the sake of it, to satisfy it, they will sacrifice life, honour, the love of mankind, and will even kill themselves if they are unable to satisfy it. We see the same thing in those who are not rich, while the poor, so far, simply drown their unsatisfied needs and envy in drink. But soon they will get drunk on blood instead of wine, they are being led to that. I ask you: is such a man free?... [I]nstead of freedom they have fallen into slavery, and instead of serving brotherly love and human unity, they have fallen, on the contrary, into disunity and isolation, as my mysterious visitor and teacher used to tell me in my youth. [313-314 - emphasis added]

The increase in isolation and segregation, and therefore murder, is now explicitly identified with a contemporary political process: the pernicious rise of "freedom". Zosima's dim view of freedom is shared, curiously enough, by his ideological arch-enemy, the Grand Inquisitor,

who finds murder and suicide to be implicit in the freedom promised by Christ:

With us everyone will be happy, and they will no longer rebel or destroy each other, as in your freedom, everywhere.... They themselves will be convinced that we are right, for they will remember to what horrors of slavery and confusion your freedom led them. Freedom, free reason, and science will lead them into such a maze ... that some of them, unruly and ferocious, will exterminate themselves; others, unruly but feeble, will exterminate each other; and the remaining third, feeble and wretched, will crawl to our feet.... [258]

We will consider these ideas more deeply at a later stage. For now, the important thing to note is that Dostoevsky was deeply troubled by the anarchy he saw in modern liberalism, and made his novel's most pious Christian and most zealous anti-Christian agree on the point that too much freedom results in murder.

The murderous implications of modernity had been one of Dostoevsky's pet notions well before *The Brothers Karamazov*, of course. In *Crime and Punishment* (1866), the murderer Raskolnikov is motivated by social alienation combined with what Dostoevsky, in a letter outlining that novel, referred to as "certain strange and half-baked ideas which are in the air" [quoted by Peace, 1971: 25]. One might even call Raskolnikov's crime doubly historical, since it enacts both contemporary social disorder *and* contemporary revolutionary ideas. "Our papers are full of stories which show the general feeling of instability which leads young men to commit terrible crimes," wrote Dostoevsky in the same letter. "In short, I am quite sure that the subject

of my novel is justified, to some extent at any rate, by the events that are happening in life today" [quoted by Magarshack, 1979: 13-14].

So when Freud asserts, in his Dostoevsky essay, that "a criminal is to [Dostoevsky] almost a Redeemer, who has taken on himself the guilt which must else have been borne by others" [Freud, 1950f: 237], he comes inadvertently close to the truth. Dostoevsky *does* use criminals to illuminate something communal which lies beyond their conscious desires. But that something is history: the Dostoevskian criminal brings social developments to a head so that their evil essence may be perceived. Dostoevsky had already used one murderer to demonstrate society's decay, and there seems to be a strong possibility that in *The Brothers Karamazov* he was doing nothing more profound than offering a stronger version of the same formula.¹¹ Murder of the father is, after all, still a kind of murder. If this argument is right, then Dostoevsky did not ascribe *unique* significance to the crime of parricide: the difference between the parricide's deed and that of the historically-motivated Raskolnikov was one only of degree, not of kind.

But what Freud means is something else altogether. In his view, what Dostoevsky's criminals enact are not historical trends that Dostoevsky deplures, but psychological impulses that Dostoevsky unconsciously shares:

Dostoevsky's sympathy for the criminal is, in fact, boundless.... There is no longer any need for one to murder, since he [i.e. the criminal] has already murdered; and one must be grateful to him, for, except for him, one would have been obliged oneself to murder. That is not just kindly pity, it is identification on the basis

¹¹A possibility enhanced by the fact that three characters in this very novel - Zosima, the Inquisitor, and the Visitor - explicitly identify social breakdown with murder (see pages 298 - 301 above).

of a similar murderous impulse - in fact, a slightly displaced narcissism.... There is no doubt that this sympathy by identification was a decisive factor in determining Dostoevsky's choice of material. He dealt first with the common criminal (whose motives are egotistical) and the political and the religious criminal; and not until the end of his life did he come back to the primal criminal, the parricide, and use him, in a work of art, for making his confession. [Freud, 1950f: 237]

So Freud knows that Dostoevsky has dealt with the subject of murder before. But he suggests that Dostoevsky's previous criminals were nothing less than parricides in disguise - for the parricide is the "primal criminal", to whom Dostoevsky *comes back* in his final novel. How valid, though, is the underlying proposition that Dostoevsky felt a "boundless" sympathy for his criminals? This thesis looks to be at its least sustainable precisely where Freud wants it most to apply most strongly: in the case of the primal criminal himself, the loathsome parricide Smerdyakov. Is there another character in the whole novel, in his whole corpus, for whom Dostoevsky displays *less* sympathy? It could be argued - or perhaps asserted is a better word - that this utter lack of *apparent* sympathy points to an abundance of sympathy in the author's unconscious, but that contention must necessarily go unsupported - indeed, must necessarily be contradicted - by the textual evidence. That does not mean it is wrong, but it does mean that it looks vulnerable when placed beside a reading that can point to plenty of textual support - namely, the view that Dostoevsky lacks sympathy for Smerdyakov because Smerdyakov is a kind of social lab rat, whom Dostoevsky is using to bring out the envy and resentment and finally the violence that he considered to be implicit in contemporary political developments.

The point is complicated, of course, by the consideration that the other brothers might be classified as criminals too, at least in a psychological sense. This is particularly true of Ivan, who vocally desires the death of his father and whom Smerdyakov will repeatedly identify as the true perpetrator of the crime. But here again the historical reading is eminently possible, for Ivan is, like Raskolnikov, a vocal proponent of the revolutionary philosophies which Dostoevsky blamed for the European malaise. Freud suggests that Dostoevsky's political criminals were parricides in disguise, but isn't Ivan, the "actual" parricide, a political criminal himself, perhaps the ultimate political criminal? Parricide was not a crime Dostoevsky *came back to* in his final novel, but rather the crime he finally arrived at by pursuing his fears about the murderous implications of modernity to their most hideous conclusion.

I shall deal with the characters of Smerdyakov and Ivan more thoroughly in due course. But to proceed for now with our more general discussion about the relationship between the theme of parricide and Dostoevsky's political philosophies, we need to ask why it was that somewhere between *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky's interest in the theme of historically-generated murder acquired a familial emphasis. What made him come to see one *particular* form of murder, a son's murder of his father, as the sharpest possible symbol of contemporary social collapse?

One simple answer can be found in the *Diary* of 1876. In a passage headed 'The Future Novel', Dostoevsky speaks of his intention to write "*my Fathers and Sons*":¹²

¹²Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* had appeared in 1861. It is a textbook demonstration of the convenience with which political tensions could be represented in terms of a quasi-Oedipal struggle between fathers and sons. Literally, the book's title translates as *Fathers and Children*. But the mistranslation *Fathers and Sons* is significant: for the rebellious children in the novel are indeed sons, in keeping with the fact that power struggles were almost by definition male affairs.

I always used to observe children, but now I am especially observing them. Long ago I set myself the ideal of writing a novel about contemporaneous Russian children and, of course, about their present-day fathers, in their actual mutual interrelation. The poem is ready; it was conceived before anything else - and so it must always be in the case of a novelist. I shall take fathers and children, if possible, from all strata of society and I shall trace the children from their earliest childhood. [Dostoevsky, 1954: 160]

But Dostoevsky turned his attention to fathers and children out of an impulse far more profound than a mere desire to emulate Turgenev. At the same time that he was planning this novel about children, he was also working on the idea of novelising his anxieties about social decay - anxieties which had the institution of the family as one of their principal objects. "The title of the novel is 'Disorder'," he wrote in a note of 1875, outlining a project which would eventually become assimilated into *The Brothers Karamazov*. "The whole idea of the novel is to show that universal disorder now reigns everywhere in society, in its affairs, in its leading ideas (which for that reason do not exist), in its convictions

An entry in a Dostoevsky notebook covering the years 1875 and 1876 echoes *Fathers and Sons* by speaking of the up-and-coming generation of rampant liberals as the wipers-out of the insufficiently liberal old generation:

A certain liberal newspaper of ours is [like] that vainly rushing captain who pushed his way into the center of the hall at a Moscow ball and barked in his national tongue. [Alas] Poor fellow! Why in fact, he thinks that he is in Europe. My dear sir, you are only a captain, not a liberal, you are a nationalist, and they will throw you out. Throw you out, my dear sir, throw you out! [Soon, very soon, just you wait.]

The generation which will take your place is now growing and will inevitably grow up. It is only in the fifth grade now, but it will grow up and come forward, and then no trace of you will be left.

You, you are just hindering a good cause. It will happen soon. The generation which will be humane, humanistic, and magnanimous is already growing up. [Proffer, 1975: 111-112]

(which do not exist, either), *in the disintegration of family life*" [quoted by Magarshack, 1982: xviii].

So Dostoevsky looked on the family as Tolstoy did in his *Diary*, and as Wilde and Huysmans, Marx and Engels did - as a decaying institution, whose sickness was part of a broader social crisis. In particular, Dostoevsky was horrified by the apparently widespread phenomenon of child abuse: he used the *Diary* to document the vile deeds of patriarchs who make Fyodor Karamazov look like a model father. "In *The Diary of a Writer*," says Wasiolek, "not only the horrors perpetrated against children, but horrors of parents against children, husbands against wives ... are chronicled" [Wasiolek, 1971: 9]. Such horrors must have seemed to Dostoevsky to bear out a maxim of his friend N. F. Fyodorov, whose "peculiar philosophy", according to Michael Holquist, Dostoevsky treated with "reverence" [Holquist, 1977: 174]. "For the present age," Fyodorov wrote, "father is the most hateful word, and son is the most degrading..." [quoted by Holquist, *ibid*].¹³

Dostoevsky offers a pertinent insight into his general social philosophy when dealing, in March 1876, with the Kroneberg case, a *cause célèbre* in which a Petersburg father was tried for sadistically beating his seven-year-old daughter with barbed sticks. Dostoevsky seizes on a line of argument taken by the defence attorney:

'I take it, you will all concede that there is family and parental authority....' Earlier he has been exclaiming that 'only then is the state solid, when it is founded upon solid family.' [Dostoevsky, 1954: 236]

¹³Cf. Algernon's "Fathers are not popular just at present" in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Dostoevsky's reply is of crucial significance:

We Russians are a young people ... and we do not possess sanctities *quand-même*. We love our sanctities but only because they are, in fact, holy. We support them not only to defend *l'ordre* by using them. Our sanctities are founded not upon their utility but upon our faith in them. We shall even refuse to defend those sanctities should we ever cease to believe in them - unlike those ancient priests who, at the end of paganism, continued to defend their idols which they had long since ceased to regard as gods. Not even one of our sanctities need ever fear a free scrutiny, but this is only because it is in reality solid. We love the sanctity of the family when it is in reality holy, and not because the state is solidly founded upon it. And, believing in the solidity of our family, we should not become afraid even if the abuse of parental authority should be brought to light and prosecuted. [237]

"I should like to see sanctities just a bit more holy," Dostoevsky adds in conclusion; "otherwise, there is no point in worshipping them" [238].

It is worth pondering these remarks about the family. Evidently Dostoevsky draws an almost Platonic distinction¹⁴ between the real

¹⁴Speaking of platonic distinctions, it is interesting to consider something Dostoevsky wrote in 1876, while psyching himself up to write the novel that would become *Karamazov*. "[G]etting ready to write a long novel, I have decided to immerse myself in the study - *not of reality itself, for I know it, as it is - but of the details of current life*. One of the most important problems of current life, for instance, concerns the younger generation and the Russian family, which I cannot help feeling is not the same as it was twenty years ago" [quoted by Magarshack, 1962: 452 - emphasis added]. Reality, then, is what Dostoevsky knows (or believes in, *has faith in*). The details of current life may or may not be in conformity with this "reality". The same point is made in a slightly different way in a famous letter Dostoevsky wrote in 1854. "If someone proved to me that Christ is outside the truth, and that *in reality* the truth were outside of Christ then I should prefer to remain with Christ than with the truth" [quoted by Ozick, 1997: 119]. In other words, Christ is a truth more important than the truth itself.

family and the ideal one. Viewed abstractly, the family is a sacred institution; but in practice - particularly in modern practice - it does not often come up to scratch. Needless to say, this is a reactionary position: while Marx and Engels ascribed the dissolution of the patriarchal family to the rottenness of its structure, Dostoevsky, perceiving a similar dissolution, blamed it on *deviation* from that structure. Only by an appropriately holy adherence to its sacred structure - "I should like to see sanctities just a bit more holy" - could the crisis of the family be resolved.

This is the philosophical framework on which *The Brothers Karamazov* is erected. It argues for holy ideals in an age of chaotic violence.¹⁵ Dostoevsky, or his narrator, makes no bones about this: on the first page he admits that his 'hero', the saintly Alyosha, will represent the author's ideal, by rising above the chaos of the real. "One thing, perhaps, is rather doubtless: he is a strange man, even an odd one.... [But] not only is an odd man 'not always' a particular and isolated case, but, on the contrary, it sometimes happens that it is precisely he, perhaps, who bears within himself the heart of the whole, while the other people of his epoch have all for some reason been torn away from it for a time by some kind of flooding wind" [Dostoevsky, 1992: 3].

Accordingly, Alyosha is used to voice the novel's ideological endorsement of the family as an institution. "You must know," he proclaims in the novel's final scene, "that there is nothing higher, or stronger, or sounder, or more useful afterwards in life, than some good memory, especially a memory from childhood, from the parental home" [774].¹⁶ But his brothers, and his father, embody the all-too-real failure of

¹⁵Andrei Bely called the novel "a highway toward heaven through madness and chaos" [quoted by Rice, 1985: 221].

¹⁶Alyosha's role as the main repository of Dostoevsky's ideals about the family is established early in the novel. As a son, Alyosha, we learn, "brought something unprecedented with him: a complete lack of contempt for him, the old man, and, on the contrary, an unvarying affection and a perfectly natural, single-hearted attachment to him, little though he deserved it. All of this came as a perfect surprise to the solitary old

the modern, secular family to live up to this eternal ideal. The act of parricide is the culmination of their degeneracy, the definitive indication of the distance of the modern family from Dostoevsky's model one. For Freud, parricide is permanently latent in all family relations. For Dostoevsky, parricide is the very opposite: it is the ultimate expression of the perverse character of the modern family. It is a thoroughly *contemporary* crime. As René Wellek wrote, "Parricide is for Dostoevsky the highest symptom of social decay, a disruption of human ties that contradicts the obligation to universal forgiveness and the promise of resurrection in the flesh with which *The Brothers Karamazov* concludes" [Wellek, 1962: 9].

Dostoevsky's faith in the family *as such* could be sustained only if the sickness of the family he saw all around him could be written off as a purely modern phenomenon. The same rule applies to the figure of the father. Dostoevsky has no wish to call the institution of patriarchy itself into question, and so the faults of fathers like Fyodor Karamazov must be blamed exclusively on modern trends.¹⁷ When Fyodor's shortcomings are catalogued by the prosecutor, their modernity is stressed.

Look at this wretched, unbridled, and depraved old man, this 'paterfamilias,' who has so sadly ended his existence. A nobleman by birth, starting out his career as a poor little sponger, who through an accidental and unexpected marriage grabs a small

lecher; it was quite unexpected for him, who until then had loved only 'iniquity'" [Dostoevsky, 1992: 94].

¹⁷Dostoevsky did not consider himself to be immune to this modern sickness. Joseph Frank refers to "a remark that Dostoevsky made sometime in the late 1870s, when he was most concerned about the breakup of the Russian family that he believed he could discern taking place all around him. Evidently recalling his own family life as the very *opposite* of the 'accidental families' of the present, Dostoevsky said to his brother Andrey that their parents had been 'outstanding people.' If they had been alive in the present rather than the beginning of the century, they would still, he maintained, merit the same designation. 'And such family men, such fathers ... we ourselves are quite incapable of being, brother!'" [Frank, 1976: 18].

capital as a dowry.... above all a usurer.... Everything contrary to the idea of a citizen, a complete, even hostile, separation from society.... [H]e is a father, and one of our modern-day fathers. Shall I offend society if I say that he is even one of many modern-day fathers? Alas, so many modern-day fathers simply do not speak their minds as cynically as this one did, for they are better bred, better educated, but essentially they are of almost the same philosophy as he. [695-696]

Fyodor Karamazov's "*complete, even hostile, separation from society*" takes us back to the "segregation" that Dostoevsky thought of as the defining disease of the era. We have already considered Dostoevsky's conviction that such hostile separation is liable to produce murderers like Raskolnikov - and Smerdyakov. Now we are informed that it also produces fathers like Fyodor. We can see now how economically Dostoevsky's anxieties are expressed by the metaphor of parricide. Social disintegration, also known as 'freedom', disrupts existing hierarchies: it makes murderous upstarts of the lower orders, and erodes the authority of the top dogs. When translated to the family, these two despicable trends meet, explosively, in the act of parricide.

The Brothers Karamazov is not a tale of the murder of the father. It is a tale of a murder of a *particular kind* of father - one who is defined, indeed, by his gross *deviation* from the norms of fatherhood. He abandons, harasses, exploits, mocks, and robs his children. Of the three masterpieces of parricide named by Freud - *Oedipus Rex*, *Hamlet* and *The Brothers Karamazov* - Dostoevsky's novel is the only one in which the murdered father is not also a king.¹⁸ Even so, he is an egregious tyrant,

¹⁸A point which the novel ironically underlines, when Fyodor utters the maxim:
"Punctuality is the courtesy of kings."

and his murder is as palpably political as any regicide. It could be argued, I suppose, that Fyodor's tyranny was an expression of Dostoevsky's parricidal wishes, or else a way of rationalizing his "murder" of his own father after the event. But far from affording us insight into Fyodor Pavlovich's tyranny, these glib claims only serve to obscure it, by ignoring its tactical role in the context of Dostoevsky's polemic. When a chess player sacrifices a pawn, we do not suppose that the player has a burning antipathy towards that particular piece of wood. It is nothing personal. It is a move contained within a wider strategy, and when considered in complete isolation it cannot be understood, only misunderstood. Dostoevsky's characters have far more psychological value than chess pieces, of course. But it is nevertheless a mistake to think of them as wholly independent psychological creations, when to a significant degree they are tokens manipulated to a certain end. In Dostoevsky's fictional game, Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov is not much more than a pawn - he is a type, a caricature of the Modern Bad Father. Dostoevsky expends no more psychological energy on him than he has to. Indeed there is considerably less passion invested in Fyodor than there is in characters whom we might otherwise think of as minor - Snegiryov, for example. Dostoevsky's hatred of Fyodor Karamazov is a hatred of the trends he stands for. "I ... consid[er] my task (*the defeat of anarchism*) to be my civic duty," Dostoevsky proclaimed during the composition of the novel [Magarshack, 476-477 - emphasis added]. Making Fyodor Karamazov a hideous tyrant was part of this civic duty. Fyodor represents anarchy, that specifically modern kind of anarchy which for other writers went by the name of "decadence." He even calls himself a "decadent" at one point: while admiring his own profile, brags of his nose that it is "'a real Roman

"'Not that you're a king,' muttered Miusov, unable to restrain himself in time."
[40]

one.... Along with my Adam's apple, it gives me the real physiognomy of an ancient Roman patrician of the decadent period.' He seemed to be proud of it" [23]. Fyodor Pavlovich is every bit as anarchistic as the modern philosophies in whose service Smerdyakov kills him. There is an important but fleeting moment at which this point is explicitly made. Dmitri, in conversation with Alyosha, is agonizing over the question of whether morality can exist in a Godless world. He refers to a discussion he has had with Ivan about the death of God.

"I said to him: 'Then everything is permitted, in that case?' He frowned: 'Fyodor Pavlovich, our papa, was a little pig,' he said, 'but his thinking was right.' That's what he came back with. That's all he ever said. It's even neater than Rakitin." [Dostoevsky, 1992: 593]

One's understanding of this exchange is not helped by the fact that Mitya is in a highly agitated state, and in no mood to be scrupulously clear. But if I have read these lines correctly, they show us Mitya attempting to trick Ivan into acknowledging the existence of God by suggesting that the alternative - everything on earth being permitted - is simply too hideous to contemplate. (This, as we shall see, is effectively the chief argument employed by Dostoevsky himself to demonstrate God's existence.) Mitya has already advanced the same argument to Rakitin, the socialist, from whom he has received the answer that, "it's possible to love mankind even without God" - as well as the related suggestion that, rather than worry about the existence of God, "you'd do better to worry about extending man's civil rights" [592-593]. So for Rakitin, it is possible to construct a purely secular ethics in God's absence - not only possible, but imperative. But Ivan, the nihilist, provides Mitya

with a more disturbing response, which one might paraphrase thus: "Wake up to yourself: there is no God: everything *is* permitted already: just look at the conduct of our father." So while the doctrine that "everything is permitted" is generally associated with Ivan - the perpetrator of the parricide, philosophically speaking - we have here an indication that the *victim* of the parricide represents an even purer embodiment of modern nihilism than does his son - who at least has the decency to despair over his nihilism, and to temper it with a bit of intellectual distinction.¹⁹ Fyodor Pavlovich commits a kind of suicide, then - he is killed by the same reprehensible philosophies he has lived by.

This puts a large dent in the Freudian reading of the novel. In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud argues that parricide is the prime taboo because it is the prime (male) temptation. Read superficially, *The Brothers Karamazov* might appear to provide tantalising confirmation of that argument, since the novel apparently suggests that if "everything is permitted" then the result will be parricide - thereby implying that a universal will to parricide snarls permanently behind the muzzle of moral law. But the lines quoted above demonstrate that the vile belief that "everything is permitted" is enacted at least as egregiously by the abusive father as it is by the parricidal son - probably even more egregiously, in fact. If the transgressions of the father - epitomised by his abuse of his children²⁰ - are placed on a par with the transgression of the

¹⁹A skeletal, and perhaps more clear, version of Ivan's despairing position is given in Dostoevsky's preliminary notes for the novel:

Is there such a law of nature that one must love humanity?

- [That is a law of God. There is no such law of nature, right?]

He (the murderer [i.e. Ivan] affirms that there is no such law, and that one loves only because of faith in immortality

The Elder - If you believe that, you are blessed or very unhappy.

The murderer:-Why unhappy?

The Elder:-In case you yourself do not believe in immortality.

The Murderer:-Yes, you have guessed it. [Dostoevsky, 1971: 39, 40]

²⁰The connection between the exploitation of children and the doctrine that everything is permitted is also made, interestingly enough, in *Les Misérables*, in which Thénardier adduces the philosophy as an excuse for selling his own sons. "On the evening of the day

parricide, then parricide is no longer as unique a crime as Freud would like it to be. Anarchy, also known as freedom, means to Dostoevsky that everyone will wreak violence on everyone else: a son murdering his father, and a father abusing his son, are merely the polar extremes of the wide spectrum of savage dissolution that Dostoevsky saw in secular modernity.

The Freudian Reading

In an article entitled “Freud and *The Brothers Karamazov*”, the critic Geoffrey Carter writes the following curious sentence:

No explanation needs to be given for any conscious hatred of the loathsome Fyodor; but why does Ivan hate him unconsciously and how is that unconscious hatred reinforced, or rather mobilized, in the course of the novel? [Carter, 1981: 25]

When Carter says that “no explanation needs to be given for any conscious hatred of the loathsome Fyodor”, it is not at all clear from internal evidence why the word “conscious” needs to be present. Couldn’t one simply say that no explanation needs to be given of *any* hatred of the loathsome Fyodor? From external evidence, of course, one

she had delivered her two little ones to Magnon, expressing her willingness freely to renounce them forever, the Thenardiess had, or feigned to have, a scruple. She said to her husband: ‘But this abandoning one’s children!’ Thenardier, magisterial and phlegmatic, cauterised the scruple with this phrase: ‘Jean Jacques Rousseau did better!’ From scruple the mother passed to anxiety: ‘But suppose the police come to torment us? What we have done here, Monsieur Thenardier, say now, is it lawful?’ Thenardier answered: ‘*Everything is lawful*. Nobody will see it but the sky. Moreover, with children who have not a sou, nobody has any interest to look closely into it’ [Hugo, 1993: 1604 - emphasis added].

knows perfectly well why Carter thinks that hatred is divided into two kinds, conscious and unconscious. He is subjecting the novel to a Freudian analysis, and accordingly has made the *a priori* assumption that the unconscious exists and that its desires are determinate. The beauty of the Freudian approach, but also its weakness in logical terms, is that once you have assumed the presence of an unconscious father-complex, you will have little trouble detecting it and demonstrating its operation, for it can manifest itself in a limitless variety of ways: as a hatred of authority (projection), as a hatred of anything at all (displacement), as a disbelief in God (projection again), as a pious belief in God (projection plus guilt), as fear of an animal (displacement again), as a love of or failure to rebel against punishment (guilt again). Indeed the impulse need not manifest itself at all, since its complete invisibility would present a clear example of a successful repression. Yet *The Brothers Karamazov*, in which hatred for the father is entirely and flagrantly manifest, can be viewed as challenge to Freudianism rather than a triumph for it. If, as Carter freely admits, Ivan consciously hates his father because of the latter's loathsomeness, and fairly openly voices his wish to see him dead, then why and how does his *repressed* hatred of his father retain its sting, its potency as a motivating force? What has happened to the ambivalence, the resistance, the displacement and all the other psychic smokescreens which Freud spoke of when evidence of father-hatred was less easy to come by? "Why does Ivan hate his father unconsciously?" Carter asks. But a better question to ask would be, "Does he really hate his father *unconsciously* at all?" *The Brothers Karamazov* places the Freudian in an environment in which the very existence of unconscious hatred of the father cannot simply be taken for granted, but must be rigorously demonstrated, and scrupulously distinguished from conscious, rational, non-oedipal hatred of the father.

Instead, however, we are treated to such pieces of analysis as this: "In Dostoevsky's great novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, the Oedipus situation stands at the focal point of interest. Old Karamazov has made himself detested by his sons through heartless oppression; in the eyes of one of them he is, in addition, a powerful rival for the woman he loves" ['The Expert Opinion in the Halsmann Case', SE, 21: 251-253]. These sentences come not from some hack disciple of Freud's, but from the pen of Freud himself.

One objects to them on grounds which are by now becoming boringly familiar: a father's "having made himself detested by his sons through heartless oppression" has nothing to do with the Oedipus situation as Freud himself defined it. Nor is Freud entitled to claim that there is something "additional" about the presence of sexual rivalry. Sexual rivalry is meant to be the very essence of the oedipal claim. Only by establishing its presence can Freud say anything about the novel that is not obvious to the lay reader.

If we return to "Dostoevsky and Parricide", we will find further moments at which Freud claims as evidence for his case things that are actually evidence against it, or which have at the very best an ambiguous value. One beautiful example is his misappropriation of a line of argument taken by Mitya's defence attorney. Countering the prosecutor's use of "psychology" to establish Mitya's guilt, the defender calls psychology "a stick with two ends"²¹ - by which he means that "one can draw whatever conclusions one likes from it" [727,728]. Demonstrating that the subtleties of psychological analysis can be used either to prove Mitya comprehensively guilty or comprehensively innocent, the

²¹A "knife that cuts both ways" is the way this phrase comes out in Strachey's translation of Freud.

defender argues that psychological interpretation, while an interesting game, is of little use in a courtroom.

But Freud reinterprets the maxim as follows:

[I]n the speech for the defence at the trial, there is the famous joke at the expense of psychology - it is 'a knife that cuts both ways': a splendid piece of disguise, for we have only to reverse it in order to discover the deepest meaning of Dostoevsky's view of things. It is not psychology that deserves to be laughed at, but the practice of judicial enquiry. It is a matter of indifference who actually committed the crime; psychology is only concerned to know who desired it emotionally and who welcomed it when it was done. And for that reason all of the brothers, except the contrasted figure of Alyosha, are equally guilty, the impulsive sensualist, the sceptical cynic and the epileptic criminal. [Freud, 1950f: 236]

There is a rich irony here, and Freud is evidently blind to it. He quotes the notion that psychology makes things mean what it wants them to mean, and then proceeds to make *it* mean what *he* wants it to mean. The quip about the stick with two ends becomes, in Freud's hands, a stick with two ends itself.

There is a broader irony as well: just before remodelling the attorney's comment about the infinite flexibility of psychology, Freud has been attempting to make mileage out of the "remarkable" fact that the killer, like Dostoevsky, is an epileptic. But now we find Freud endorsing Dostoevsky's supposed hint that "it is a matter of indifference who actually committed the crime". The sons are "equally guilty" - except, Freud has to concede, for Alyosha.

Why Alyosha is not as guilty as the other sons is a question that Freud doesn't seek to answer. Indeed it is hard to see how he *could* answer it, believing as he does that the will to parricide is primal, a rule to which there are no exceptions.²² But if we dispense with the notion that the theme of parricide was an expression of Dostoevsky's unconscious, and read it instead as a theme of which Dostoevsky was in

²²In Michael Holquist's Freudian reading of the book, contained in his *Dostoevsky and the Novel*, we find the claim that Alyosha is indeed "implicated in the other brothers' desire for their father's death, a point made most unambiguously when Ivan asks what should be done with a general who turned his Borzoi hounds on a naked little peasant boy, clearly a metaphoric recasting of the relations between Fyodor Pavlovich and his sons: "Shoot him!" Alyosha said softly, raising his eyes to his brother with a pale, twisted smile" [Holquist, 1977: 189].

"Most unambiguous" means the same thing as "least ambiguous", and all that means is that the novel's other indications of Alyosha's will to parricide (if indeed there are any) are even less impressive than this one. And this one, when probed, proves to be not very impressive at all. For a start, if we consider Alyosha's words in their context, they begin to look far less suggestive. Ivan does not simply ask Alyosha what should be done with the abusive general. He says:

"Well ... what to do with him? Shoot him? Shoot him for our moral satisfaction? Speak, Alyoshka!"

"Shoot him," Alyosha said softly, etc. [Dostoevsky, 1992: 243]

So Alyosha's response is not as spontaneous - and therefore not as psychologically revealing - as Holquist seems to suggest. Moreover, Alyosha's desire for the general's death is quite reasonable on an objective level, so it does not necessarily give us any insight into his deepest counter-rational subjective wishes. (If he desired the death of Father Zosima, say, then we might be onto something.) Ivan is trying to prove the absurdity of human existence by citing the most grossly inhumane cases of torture he has ever heard of: he has deliberately manoeuvred Alyosha into a corner in which he can hardly, from the point of view of justice, say anything other than "Shoot him!" If the general's torture of the peasant boy is "clearly a metaphoric recasting" of the Karamazov situation, then doesn't it serve to bring out the reasonableness, the objective validity, the politically-conditioned nature, of the sons' desire for their father's death?

But the Freudian can yield this point without dispensing with the claim that the novel is eminently oedipal. From the Freudian point of view, it scarcely matters that Dostoevsky gave his fictional characters a will to parricide that was rationally justifiable. For Dostoevsky's, the Freudian would argue, was the real, the non-fictional will to parricide, and that *was* oedipal. This is to ignore, however, the large extent to which these patterns in the Karamazov family call into question the very concept of the Oedipus complex. Many indisputably real social trends of Dostoevsky's time are visible in the Karamazovs. For example, Dostoevsky was not imagining things when he proposed that the grossly negligent and abusive Fyodor resembled certain modern-day fathers. Likewise, Ivan's stories of the abuse of children by adults, including the story of the general and his dogs, were all too real, culled from actual Russian newspapers. If, as seems quite possible in light of these correspondences, the politically-conditioned will to parricide that we find in the novel *also* corresponded to a real-life phenomenon, then it becomes possible to suspect that the will to parricide Freud discovered in his patients, and from which he deduced the existence of the Oedipus complex, was itself a mere instance of this historical phenomenon.

full conscious control, then we have no trouble at all understanding why Alyosha alone should not desire his father's death. Dostoevsky's polemical mission had two main objectives: to discredit modernity, and to reassert Orthodox Christianity as its cure. The character of Alyosha acts and speaks in the service of the second objective. He was Dostoevsky's ideal. The remaining brothers, on the other hand, serve the negative part of his project. The impulsive sensualist, the sceptical cynic and the epileptic criminal personified the impulsive sensuality, the sceptical cynicism and the criminality that, in Dostoevsky's view, characterised modernity. They desire their father's death because they represent the forces of anarchy. Alyosha does not desire it, because he represents the binding force of Christian love.

This same role is played, on a larger scale, by the character of Zosima. While Alyosha asserts the holy ideal in family relations, Zosima enacts the beneficence of Christian love on a wider stage. If one has grasped this elementary point, one will have no trouble understanding the significance of an early scene which Freud thinks of as a profound mystery, insoluble without the aid of psychoanalysis:

In *The Brothers Karamazov* there is one particularly revealing scene. In the course of his talk with Dmitri, Father Zosima recognises that Dmitri is prepared to commit parricide, and he bows down at his feet. It is impossible that this can be meant as an expression of admiration; it must mean that the holy man is rejecting the temptation to despise or detest the murderer and for that reason humbles himself before him. Dostoevsky's sympathy for the criminal is, in fact, boundless; it goes far beyond the pity which the unhappy wretch might claim, and reminds us of the 'holy awe' with which epileptics and lunatics were regarded in the

past. A criminal is to him almost a Redeemer, who has taken on himself the guilt which must else have been borne by others. There is no longer any need for one to murder, since he has already murdered; and one must be grateful to him, for, except for him, one would have been obliged oneself to murder. This is not just kindly pity, it is identification on the basis of a similar murderous impulse - in fact, a slightly displaced narcissism.... This may perhaps be quite generally the mechanism of kindly sympathy with other people, a mechanism which one can discern with especial ease in the extreme case of the guilt-ridden novelist. [Freud, 1950f: 236, 237]

I apologise for quoting material which I have quoted before in another context, but this passage must be considered in its entirety. Freud appears to be saying that Zosima, standing in for Dostoevsky, executes a gesture of unconscious gratitude to the would-be parricide - "for, except for him, one would have been obliged oneself to murder." Freud's reading of the bow is right, I think, only in one very limited sense. Zosima is indeed acting as an authorial emissary in this scene. But the kneeling holy man is not representing Dostoevsky's parricidal unconscious. On the contrary, he is acting in the service of Dostoevsky's conscious philosophies. His bow is a thoroughly intentional piece of authorial propaganda. It comes as the conclusion to an argument about Christian love which has been set up during a two-chapter interlude in which Zosima, prior to the entrance of Mitya, has adjourned from the cell to meet with some visiting constituents. In the second of these chapters, "A Lady of Little Faith", Zosima receives Madame Khokhlakov, who complains of her desire for "proof" of human immortality. She confesses to modern-style doubts; she even quotes the atheistic doctrine

of the Nihilist Bazarov from Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* [Pevear and Volokhonsky, 1990: 781]. The Elder replies that while proof is tricky, "it is possible to be convinced ... [b]y the experience of *active* love.... The more you succeed in loving, the more you'll be convinced of the existence of God and the immortality of your soul" [56 - emphasis added]. Is Zosima's impending bow before Dmitri Karamazov perhaps an example of this "active" Christian love, a physical version of his verbal affirmation of the existence of God?

To explore this possibility further, let us move back into the first chapter of this Zosima-based interlude, which is entitled "Women of Faith". One of these women has a dreadful confession to make to Zosima:

‘I'm three years a widow,’ she began in a half-whisper, with a sort of shudder. ‘My married life was hard, he was old, he beat me badly. Once he was sick in bed; I was looking at him and I thought: what if he recovers, gets up on his feet again, what then? And then the thought came to me ...’

‘Wait,’ said the elder, and put his ear right to her lips. The woman continued in a soft whisper, almost inaudibly. She soon finished. [Dostoevsky, 1992: 52]

One thing this chapter tells us, then, is that the brothers Karamazov are not alone: here is another victim of patriarchy who has been driven into desiring the death of the patriarch. Dostoevsky subtly shows that the drama going on in the cell is by no means an anomaly, but is sadly representative of a general malaise.

But the really significant thing about this woman's confession is Zosima's reply to it:

‘There is not and cannot be in the whole world such a sin that the Lord will not forgive one who truly repents of it. A man even cannot commit so great a sin as would exhaust God’s boundless love. How could there be a sin that exceeds God’s love?... Believe that God loves you so as you cannot conceive of it; even with your sin and in your sin he loves you.’ [52]

This speech, I would suggest, functions as an exact verbal correlative of the bow that Zosima will shortly execute before the parricidal Dmitri Karamazov. When Zosima has finished speaking with the women of faith, he “blesse[s] them all and bow[s] deeply to them” - a gesture which reinforces the boundlessness of his forgiving love [52]. But to love and forgive a repentant woman of faith is one thing; to love and forgive a parricide quite another. Indeed if we read the above speech as a comment on the situation in the cell, we yield the suggestion that parricide is the greatest possible sin, and therefore the most exacting test of the proposition that “man ... cannot commit a sin so great a sin as would exhaust God’s boundless love”. So when Zosima, God’s representative, abases himself before the parricide, God’s love passes the ultimate test. While modernity shuns God, God can face, and forgive, the worst that modern anarchy has to offer. So the submissive posture is misleading: what Zosima is demonstrating is Christianity’s ethical *superiority* to all those unsavoury modern *isms* that parricide symbolises.

At the conclusion of Ivan’s fable of Grand Inquisitor, the figure of Jesus himself performs a parallel manoeuvre.

"The old man would have liked [Christ] to say something, even something bitter, terrible. But suddenly he approaches the old man in silence and gently kisses him on his bloodless, ninety-year-old lips. That is the whole answer. The old man shudders."

[262]

Notice that Christ's gesture is construed as an *answer*. It is a way of refuting the arguments of the atheist, containing them, transcending them. Given that the gesture comes in a narrative concocted by Ivan, one might think that that crafty Nihilist is condemning it as an inadequate answer - yet it is very similar to Zosima's answer to parricide, and identical to the response favoured by Alyosha when Ivan concludes the Grand Inquisitor story. Ivan says: "The formula, 'everything is permitted,' I will not renounce, and what then? Will you renounce me for that? Will you?"

Alyosha stood up, went over to him in silence, and gently kissed him on the lips.

"Literary theft!" Ivan cried, suddenly going into some kind of rapture. "You stole that from my poem." [263]

Ivan's arguments cannot be answered rationally but they can be trumped by an answer which Dostoevsky seems to consider better than rational. To kiss the nihilist (or to bow to the parricide) is to go one better than to renounce him - it is to accept and transcend him, to convert his challenge to God into a proof of God's existence. "Dostoevsky, granting almost everything to the enemy [atheism] in order to defeat him with the ultimate weapon, bets everything on one last card, religion," wrote Hans Urs von Balthasar [quoted by Wellek, 1962: 9]. In other words,

Dostoevsky can afford to state Ivan's arguments with all the rhetorical force he can muster, because he is going to top them with a Christian conclusion, Alyosha's kiss.²³ Ivan's is not an argument Dostoevsky opposes, it is an argument he considers incomplete: a premise for the Christian attitude rather than a refutation of it. Yes, suffering on earth is irrefutable, yes it is appalling; but don't these things give us all the more reason to believe in the healing power of God's love? Dostoevsky appropriates contemporary chaos and makes it the central part of his religious argument.

In order to illuminate this point, it is worth requoting Dostoevsky's preliminary notes on the cell scene:

tell the old man the *theme*: Is there anything on earth that would force man to love humanity?

Or:

Is there such a law of nature that one must love humanity?

- [That is a law of God. There is no such law of nature, right?]

He (the murderer [i.e. Ivan]) affirms that there is no such law, and that one loves only because of faith in immortality

The Elder - If you believe that, you are blessed or very unhappy.

The murderer:-Why unhappy?

The Elder:-In case you yourself do not believe in immortality.

The Murderer:-Yes, you have guessed it. [Dostoevsky, 1971: 39, 40]

So Dostoevsky's is a peculiarly modern Christianity, conceived in, and asserted against, a peculiarly modern atmosphere. He has taken on

²³In this respect, Dostoevsky's faith is reminiscent of psychoanalytic theory, which also has an answer for everything, and therefore always has the last word. But at least Dostoevsky's outlook has the excuse of being unashamedly a religious faith.

board the Enlightenment's demystifications of moral law; he apprehends, vividly, the nihilism they imply. When Ivan excuses the crime of parricide with the dictum that "One viper devours another", he sees an anarchy in godlessness which Dostoevsky detects just as strongly. The difference is that Ivan believes *only* in the secular world; Dostoevsky believes in an additional world whose love can reunite humanity. Dostoevsky believes, with Ivan, that if God is dead, then everything is permitted. But he considers that the most pressing reason of all to think that God is *not* dead.²⁴ "It is not as a child that I believe in Christ and profess His teaching," Dostoevsky wrote in his notebook; "my hosanna has burst through a purging flame of doubts" [quoted by Zenkovsky, 1962: 130].

Barbey d'Aurevilly told Huysmans that after writing a novel like *À Rebours*, he would have to choose between "the muzzle of a pistol and the foot of the Cross" [Baldick, 1987: 12].²⁵ When Dostoevsky wrote *The Brothers Karamazov*, he was at the foot of the cross already - but in other respects he was as resolutely modern as Huysmans. He can look modern anarchy square in the face, and use the Karamazov family to rub our nose in it, because he has the antidote, or thinks he does. The modern condition becomes an argument in favour of the existence of God.

²⁴Alyosha is Dostoevsky's ideal picture of piety, but one finds a faith more akin to Dostoevsky's own in the tortured Dmitri, who says: "Rakitin's lying: if God is driven from the earth, we'll meet him underground! It's impossible for a convict to be without God, even more impossible than for a non-convict!... What if he doesn't exist? What if Rakitin is right, that it's an artificial idea of mankind? So then, if he doesn't exist, man is the chief of the earth, of the universe. Splendid! Only how is he going to be virtuous without God? ... Because what is virtue? - answer me that, Alexei. I have one virtue and a Chinese has another - so it's a relative thing" [593]. Therefore, Mitya seems to be saying, God must exist.

²⁵D'Aurevilly was proved right, of course: Huysmans "became a fervent Catholic, and regarded *À Rebours* as an important stage in that process" [Hough, 1961: 197].

The Death of Dostoevsky's Father

In order to give the Freudian reading of *The Brothers Karamazov* a fair hearing, we need to look into the death of Dostoevsky's father. Here, on the face of it, is a piece of evidence which gives Freud an indisputable right to think of parricide as a theme of tremendous *subjective* significance for Dostoevsky. Freud says:

The unmistakable connection between the murder of the father in *The Brothers Karamazov* and the fate of Dostoevsky's own father has struck more than one of his biographers, and has led them to refer to 'a certain modern school of psychology'. From the standpoint of psycho-analysis (for that is what is meant), we are tempted to see in that event the severest trauma and to regard Dostoevsky's reaction to it as the turning-point of his neurosis. [Freud, 1950f: 228].

What, we should first ask, is so 'unmistakable' about the connection between the murders? Was the real-life murder similar in *nature* to the fictional crime? Or does the sole connection between the crimes reside in the fact that both occurred? And if that is the extent of the connection, how excited by it should we be?

Mikhail Andreyevich Dostoevsky died at the hands of a gang of his oppressed peasants. The crime was coldly premeditated, the outcome of a conspiracy. The action began, as two witnesses later recalled, when four of the peasants declared that they were too ill to work.

The master was carrying a big stick with him that day, so he pointed to it and said, 'All right, I shall cure them!' ... [T]he

master arrived in Chermoshnya. The peasants were standing about in the street. 'Why haven't you gone out to work?' 'We're ill, sir,' they said. 'Oh?' said the master. 'Well, in that case I'm going to cure you!' And he raised his stick. The peasants fled from him into the yard, but he ran after them. As soon as he ran into the yard, Vassily Nikitin, a tall, strong, healthy fellow, seized him from behind by the arms, but the others stood still, looking frightened. Vassily shouted to them: 'What are you standing there for? Forgotten what we'd planned to do, have you?' The peasants then rushed at the master, caught him by his private parts and twisted them. They did not beat him for fear of being heard. They unclenched the master's teeth, poured the entire contents of a bottle of spirits down his throat and thrust a rag into his mouth. That's how the master got suffocated. [Magarshack, 1962: 21]²⁶

When we consider its nature, we see that the murder of Dostoevsky's father is not entirely helpful to the Freudian case. For it is hard to imagine how any murder, outside of an actual assassination, could be more overtly political than this one, more intimately connected with the shifting power relations of its time. The oppressive tyrant Dr Dostoevsky was the victim, as it were, of a mini-revolution.²⁷ His son would have been left in even less doubt than Oscar Wilde was that all authority was precarious, and that true force lay on the side of the governed. Even after the attack the murderous peasants retained a

²⁶Joseph Frank [1976: 86, n.2] discusses recently unearthed evidence suggesting that Dr Dostoevsky's death might not have been a murder at all. What matters in the present context, however, is that as far as Dostoevsky himself was aware, his father was murdered by his peasants in the fashion described above.

²⁷The twisting of the private parts, which might well not even have occurred (on this question see Frank, 1976: 86 n.1), ought not to be seized on, so to speak, as evidence that the attack was sexually rather than politically motivated. On the contrary, it demonstrates that oppressive power and masculinity were so intertwined that it is folly to consider either one of them in isolation.

perverse and sinister hold over their masters, for the murdered man's heirs found themselves powerless to challenge the official verdict of heart attack. "The family," says Magarshack, drawing on the account given in the memoirs of Dostoevsky's brother Aleksey, "were reluctant to contest this verdict, because if the true state of affairs had been disclosed, almost the whole male population of Chermoshnya would have been sent to Siberia and his father's heirs would have faced ruin" [Magarshack: 20]. If that is true, then financial considerations forced Dostoevsky into a kind of collusion with his father's killers, and thus favoured him with painful first-hand knowledge of the will to parricide that was inscribed in patrilineal economics.

If the death of Dostoevsky's father is to influence our thinking about the novel, then surely it can only encourage the kind of counter-Freudian reading we have been proposing. I have argued that Dostoevsky used the murder of Fyodor Karamazov to render social turbulence palpable, and this argument only looks stronger in light of the fact that the novelist's own father had met his death at the coalface, as it were, of the class struggle. The murder of a patriarch as an expression of social discontent - to other artists of the period this was merely a metaphor deducible from the *Zeitgeist*; to the young Dostoevsky, it was a reality he had experienced with traumatic force. So this may, after all, be a case in which the subject's social attitudes - his rage against revolution, his distaste for the upward mobility of the oppressed, his reverence for the existing power structure - can legitimately be traced to his feelings about his father. Those feelings were not determined by infantile wishes, however. They were determined by the fact that the father's life had been claimed, in effect, by social forces.

Smerdyakov

Like the murderers of Dostoevsky's father, the murderer in *The Brothers Karamazov* is a disgruntled servant.²⁸ Over the parricidal bastard Smerdyakov, Fyodor Karamazov exercises two separate brands of officially-endorsed tyranny: that of the father over the son, and that of the master over the servant. But there is more than a hint of the master-slave relationship in Fyodor's dealings with his other sons, too. In this respect Smerdyakov serves to bring out patterns latent in all father-son relations, just as he will do when he commits parricide - a parricide which is not merely a parricide, because its victim is not merely his father. Fyodor Karamazov is also Smerdyakov's boss, his oppressor, and so the crime is at least partially, and perhaps primarily, an act of revolution. Again, these mitigating factors must also obtain, albeit in a subtler way, in the case of the parricide who is not *literally* his father's servant.

"He's a lackey and a boor," Ivan says to his father of Smerdyakov. "*Prime cannon fodder, however, when the time comes....* There will be others and better ones, but there will be his kind as well" [Dostoevsky,

²⁸Even before Smerdyakov murders, a connection between servants and murder is made during the confessions of Zosima's Mysterious Visitor. In order to commit murder and get away with it, the Visitor relies on two lamentable qualities of the modern servant: incompetence and irreverence. First, he is able to gain entry to his victim's home because he knows that "because of the servants' negligence, the door at the foot of the stairway was not always locked. He hoped for such carelessness this time, and was not disappointed" [Dostoevsky, 1992: 305]. Having conducted the slaying, he proceeds to frame the servants, a task again facilitated by certain shortcomings of the modern lackey: "with infernal and criminal calculation, he arranged things so that the blame would fall on the servants: he did not scruple to take her purse; with her keys, taken from under her pillow, he opened her bureau and took certain things from it, precisely as an ignorant servant would have done, leaving the valuable papers and taking only money.... Her serf Pyotr was the immediate suspect, and circumstances all came together just then to confirm the suspicion, for this servant knew, and the dead woman had made no secret of it, that she intended to send him to the army, to fulfil her quota of peasant recruits.... *He had been heard, angry and drunk, in a tavern, threatening to kill her*" [305-306 - emphasis added]. The servant dies during his trial, and the case is closed. So here is a hint that a rebellious servant's economic murder of a master is a more plausible, a more natural occurrence than the crime of passion.

1992: 132 - emphasis added]. To Ivan's horror, this prediction proves correct: in murdering the tyrant, Smerdyakov is effectively acting as cannon fodder for at least two revolutionary theses: the nihilist notion that everything is permitted, and the liberal idea that servants are as good as their masters. In that very significant sense at least, his crime is a political one. And there is arguably an even deeper sense in which this is a political parricide: although Dostoevsky would like us to think that the ideologies which Smerdyakov enacts are half-baked and despicable (not least because they lead to murder), we see more than enough heartless maltreatment of Smerdyakov to suspect that the left might be right, and that the servile should not be forced to live with their oppression.

It is in relation to Smerdyakov that Freud makes what is surely the most bizarre assertion in his Dostoevsky essay. He is speaking of the various ways in which literature's three masterpieces of parricide deviate, supposedly through self-censorship, from the core oedipal narrative devised by himself.

The Russian novel goes a step further in the same direction [as Hamlet]. There also the murder is committed by someone else [i.e. someone other than the hero]. This other person, however, stands to the murdered man in the same filial relation as the hero, Dmitri; in this other person's case the motive of sexual rivalry is openly admitted; he is a brother of the hero's, and it is a remarkable fact that Dostoevsky has attributed to him his own illness, the alleged epilepsy, as though he were seeking to confess that the epileptic, the neurotic, in himself was a parricide.

[Freud, 1950f: 236]

This awkward passage is rife with rubbery claims. Is Dmitri really the 'hero' of the novel? If Freud thinks so, it is probably because Dmitri is the only brother who has a skerrick of a sexual reason for wanting his father dead. The claim that Smerdyakov and Dmitri stand "in the same filial relation" to their father is likewise a tendentious one, which can be sustained only by ignoring every single social aspect of those relations, and focussing entirely on their biology. But it is Freud's casual assertion that in the case of Smerdyakov "the motive of sexual rivalry is openly admitted" which is the most breathtaking feature of the passage. Sexual rivalry? Smerdyakov? What scene or passage can Freud possibly be referring to? *Openly admitted*? Even if we employ that phrase with the looseness which psychoanalysis has perhaps forever imparted to it, it remains impossible to justify. If Freud can perceive the motive of sexual rivalry in Smerdyakov, then he is capable of finding it anywhere.

For it is difficult to conceive of a less sexual character than the cold, passionless, grotesque Smerdyakov. If he represents desire for the mother in disguise, then it is a very good disguise indeed. His crime seems to be the very opposite of a crime of passion. "For pity's sake, sir," he says to Ivan, "how could I have thought it all up in such a flurry? It was all thought out beforehand" [631].

When Smerdyakov's sexuality is referred to at all, it is always in negative terms: he has none. He looks "like a eunuch", we are told [125]; "he seemed to despise the female sex as much as the male, and behaved solemnly, almost inaccessibly, with it" [126]. When Fyodor suggests that Smerdyakov get married, the lackey turns "pale with vexation at such talk" [126]. And perhaps he does not merely *look* like a eunuch: Richard Peace, in his *Dostoevsky*, identifies several moments of arcane symbolism in the book whereby Smerdyakov is "strongly associated with the sect of the castrates" [Peace, 1971: 261-262, 327]. If Smerdyakov is

literally a castrate, this can be related, as Peace himself points out, to the fact that "Freud in his article 'Dostoevsky and Parricide' stresses that castration is the punishment meted out for the Oedipal crime" [327, n.23]. This takes us even further away from the possibility that "sexual rivalry is openly admitted" in Smerdyakov's case, but nevertheless it is another way of incorporating the ^{novel} into a Freudian reading. One could respond to it by suggesting that Smerdyakov is a eunuch because Dostoevsky is engaging in a Dickensian ploy, using Smerdyakov's physical features to body forth his political status. As a bastard and a lackey, after all, Smerdyakov is a kind of social eunuch, condemned by his father to cultural impotence. To which the Freudian could reply that the innumerable ways in which his father oppresses Smerdyakov are all mere echoes of the paradigmatic sexual deprivation. We here reach a kind of stalemate, induced by the incompatibility of our *a priori* assumptions: the Freudian perspective privileges sexuality above everything else, whereas the non-Freudian perspective doesn't.

Perhaps that stalemate can never be broken, or can be broken only by a philosopher. From a literary point of view, the best one can do is to test both perspectives against a novel like Dostoevsky's, and see how effectively they illuminate the text, or whether they illuminate it at all. One aspect of the Freudian reading which one is surely entitled to deem a defect is the fact that there is not a great deal of reading involved in it. From a vast novel Freud seizes only on a handful of lines and scenes, like a kidnapper collecting snippings for a ransom note. The Freudian will respond that this relative lack of textual contact points is more than compensated for by the searing intensity of the light thrown on them. That is a matter of opinion, but it remains objectively true to say that the principal fuel of the Freudian reading is not quotations of Dostoevsky, but quotations of Freud. On the other hand, the historical approach has

at least one objective virtue: there is no sentence in the novel's 700-odd pages that it needs to be afraid of.

Consider the chapter "Smerdyakov with a Guitar", in which Smerdyakov converses with the amorous Maria Kondratievna. Freud does not mention this chapter. One could imagine a Freudian perhaps devoting a few facile words to the symbolic qualities of the musical instrument in Smerdyakov's hands, but as far as the oedipal view of the novel is concerned, this is on the whole a chapter which Dostoevsky may as well not have written. But he did write it, and on inspection it contains information highly pertinent to the 'mystery' of why Smerdyakov commits parricide. Alyosha, eavesdropping on the conversation, perceives that Smerdyakov speaks somewhat politely, but "above all with firm and insistent dignity. Apparently the man had the upper hand and the woman was flirting with him" [224]. As the conversation progresses, we see that it is the upper hand, rather than the flirtation, which excites Smerdyakov. Is that because he is physically a eunuch? Or is it rather because he is a social eunuch, to whom dignity and the upper hand are so rarely available that when he gets them he wants to make as much mileage out of them as he can, by condescending to the lady as thoroughly as everybody else condescends to him? The possibility that these political considerations determine Smerdyakov's behaviour is enhanced by the fragments of self-pitying social analysis with which he favours the lady. "I could have done even better, miss, and I'd know a lot more, if it wasn't for my destiny ever since childhood. I'd have killed a man in a duel with a pistol for calling me low-born, because I came from Stinking Lizaveta without a father..." [224]. There, in a nutshell, is Smerdyakov's political motive for parricide: his aching desire to advance, to do better, to know more; his bitter awareness that he never will, thanks to his birth, for which his father is to blame. If he is

willing to kill a man for *calling* him low-born, should we be surprised when he kills the man who *made* him low-born?

Smerdyakov's eunuch-like appearance ties in, of course, with the generally repulsive nature of his physical presence. Smerdyakov's appearance is not as superficial a matter as it sounds, because it is clearly connected with what Dostoevsky considered to be the repulsive nature of Smerdyakov's politics. Ailing towards the novel's end, Smerdyakov looks "thin and yellow.... His dry eunuch's face seemed to have become very small, his side-whiskers were dishevelled, and instead of a tuft, only a thin little wisp of hair stood up on his head" [605]. Reading that description, one is reminded of another physical description for which Dostoevsky pulls out all the stops: that of Smerdyakov's father, Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov, he of the hooked decadent nose and the fleshy goitre. Smerdyakov and Fyodor, the characters who meet in the act of parricide, are the book's two most vividly repellent presences.²⁹ By no coincidence, they also represent the two most egregious affronts to Dostoevsky's vision of what the family ought to be ("in a word, holy"). Their physical grotesquerie implies an ethical judgement: their disgusting fleshiness points to their disgusting materialism.³⁰ From his contempt for these two characters, one can deduce Dostoevsky's psychological distance from the act of parricide in which they come hideously together. The act is his horrified caricature of modern tendencies. It is a repugnant clash of materialistic animals which Dostoevsky views with grimacing disdain. He does not participate in it psychologically, either with fevered approval or with fervent guilt. He stands far above it, not so much paring his nails as holding his nose.

²⁹There is a third character who belongs in this gallery of grotesque caricatures: the egregious Captain Snegiryov. I will be discussing the interesting relation between him and his son, Ilyusha, in due course.

³⁰By contrast, Alyosha, the character representing Dostoevsky's antidote to the materialist malady, is surely the book's *least* vivid major character.

In these two hideous characters the contradictions of Dostoevsky's politics are again evident. In feeling repelled by Fyodor Karamazov, Dostoevsky displays the taste of a revolutionary, or at least a progressive - Ivan, for example, is also disgusted by the old man. But the novelist's contempt for Smerdyakov, the upwardly mobile bastard and lackey, is less politically correct. To despise both the oppressive master and the oppressed servant is in terms of earthly politics somewhat paradoxical. But these apparently conflicting attitudes stand revealed as two parts of the same attitude, once we remember that Dostoevsky's politics lay beyond this world. Dostoevsky held an ideal conception of The Family which allowed him to condemn the transgressions of the abusive father and the revolutionary son with equal vehemence, and freed him of the obligation to decide which was the lesser of these two evils.

But reality seems to complicate Dostoevsky's project in the following way. Fyodor Karamazov can be made to stand, unproblematically enough, for one kind of familial unholiness - namely, abusive parenting. There is nothing to stop us from sharing Dostoevsky's complete contempt for him. But the character of Smerdyakov is not so clear-cut. Dostoevsky would like him to stand purely for the other kind of familial unholiness, the impiety of children. But Smerdyakov does not end up representing this kind of unholiness alone. To some extent - and arguably to a very large extent - Smerdyakov represents abusive parenting too, by being a victim of it, a function of it. If one condemns Fyodor Karamazov's misbehaviour outright, isn't one obliged to direct some sympathy towards Smerdyakov, its most salient victim?

Dostoevsky thinks not, and as a result Smerdyakov comes across as a surreally inhuman character, a monster from birth. As a young child,

for example, Smerdyakov interrupts a Scripture lesson from his acting father Grigory, in order to ask, with the impertinence of the materialist:

‘The Lord God created light on the first day, and the sun, moon and stars on the fourth day. Where did the light shine from on the first day?’ Grigory was dumbfounded. The boy looked derisively at his teacher; there was even something supercilious in his look. Grigory could not help himself. ‘I’ll show you where!’ he shouted, and gave his pupil a violent blow on the cheek. The boy suffered the slap without a word, but again hid in the corner for a few days. A week later, as it happened, they discovered that he had the falling sickness, which never left him for the rest of his life. [124]

It is important to notice that Smerdyakov’s insurrection *precedes* his being struck. This typifies Dostoevsky’s apparent refusal to countenance any earthly connection between the two familial phenomena he most hates, the abuse of fatherly authority and the insubordination of children. To Dostoevsky there can be no possibility that the bastard’s upbringing might explain, let alone legitimate, his repellent persona and his perpetration of parricide. For if such a connection is made, then all the problems of modernity - problems which Dostoevsky wants us to think of as insoluble except by a return to Christian love - are opened to a simple secular solution: be a better father, and the rest will follow.

As a consequence of this tangled way of thinking on the part of his creator, there is something deeply absurd about Smerdyakov. His discourse, his behaviour, are consistent only inasmuch as they embody everything that Dostoevsky opposes. Smerdyakov is even made to advocate (and thereby to discredit) the beating of servants, even though

as a servant himself he will be on the receiving end of such violence. He says to Ivan:

‘you, being your parent’s son, ought first of all to have reported me to the police and given me a thrashing, sir ... at least slapped me in the mug right there ...’

‘Yes, it’s a pity I didn’t slap you in the mug,’ [Ivan] grinned bitterly. ‘... it’s a pity it didn’t occur to me; though beating is forbidden, I’d have made hash out of your ugly snout.’

Smerdyakov looked at him almost with delight. ‘In the ordinary occasions of life,’ he spoke in that complacently doctrinaire tone in which he used to argue about religion with Grigory Vasilievich and tease him while they were standing at Fyodor Pavlovich’s table, ‘in the ordinary occasions of life, mug-slapping is indeed forbidden by law nowadays, and everyone has stopped such beatings, sir, but in distinctive cases of life, not only among us but all over the world, be it even the most complete French republic, beatings do go on all the same....’ [616]

Dostoevsky wants Smerdyakov to be the ultimate upstart, a freethinking lackey who will oppose his master in everything, even if that means arguing in favour of his own thrashing. There is an earlier point in the novel at which Smerdyakov effectively argues for his own beating. He says to Maria Kondratievna: “The Russian people need thrashing, miss, as Fyodor Pavlovich rightly said yesterday, though he’s a madman, he and all his children, miss” [225]. This is not Smerdyakov the insubordinate speaking, but Smerdyakov the representative of another modern vice: namely, the parroting of defective social theories. Smerdyakov, we are supposed to think, is such a mixed-up fool that any

practice or notion he adopts is instantly discredited.³¹ This principle applies chiefly, of course, to the atheistic ideas in whose service Smerdyakov commits parricide. "You killed him," Smerdyakov informs Ivan; "you are the main killer, and I was just your minion, your faithful servant Licharda, and I performed the deed according to your word.... You used to be brave once, sir, you used to say 'Everything is permitted,' sir, and now you've got so frightened" [623, 625].

When Smerdyakov adduces Ivan's political philosophy as his motivation for the crime, and then shortly afterwards suggests that he killed for the money, in order to "begin a life on such money in Moscow" [632], he appears to be engaging in double talk. But on inspection these stories might not be so inconsistent after all. If poverty has ground Smerdyakov down so far that he will consider murdering because of it, then he has every right to embrace, and even to implement, theories which challenge the existing social order. Smerdyakov's personal experience proves that Ivan is right to condemn the utter injustice of the system. Indeed the lackey does not have to get his radical social theories entirely from Ivan: he can come up with similar theories of his own simply by looking around him.

"Dmitri Fyodorovich is worse than any lackey, in his behaviour, and in his intelligence, and in his poverty, miss, and he's not fit for anything, but, on the contrary, he gets honour from everybody. I may be only a broth-maker, but if I'm lucky I can open a cafe-restaurant in Moscow, on the Petrovka. Because I cook *specialités*, and no one in Moscow except foreigners can serve *specialités*.

³¹In their 'Notes' to *The Brothers Karamazov*, Richard Pevear and Laura Volokhonsky point out that Dostoevsky uses the jejune Madame Khokhlakova and the immature Kolya Krasotkin in the same way - to articulate, and thereby to discredit, certain liberal notions he detests [see Pevear and Volokhonsky: 789, 792].

Dmitri Fyodorovich is a ragamuffin, but if he were to challenge the biggest count's son to a duel, he would accept, miss, and how is he any better than me? Because he's a lot stupider than me. He's blown so much money, and for nothing, miss." [225]

It is hard to fault this speech. We can scarcely disagree that Dmitri Karamazov is stupid, has blown his money, is unworthy of respect. Why should a mere accident of birth allow him to enjoy superior social status? What about ability and merit? In the work of a more liberal writer - perhaps Dickens - the above speech would no doubt carry the author's endorsement. But Dostoevsky considers such ideas to be profoundly dangerous. Indeed they come perilously close to being a theoretical endorsement of parricide: for isn't Fyodor Pavlovich, too, worse than any lackey in his conduct? Why should *he* enjoy financial and political hegemony over his much maturer sons?

How does Dostoevsky go about rebutting this ideological justification of parricide? He can scarcely dispute the premise that Dmitri Karamazov is a figure unworthy of honour and respect. Nor can he fairly dismiss Smerdyakov's unrest as a naive importation of European claptrap, since Smerdyakov has clearly derived it straight from his own social reality. The truth is that Dostoevsky wants us to think of Smerdyakov's revolutionary sentiments as invalid - bastardized³² - simply because they proceed from the lips of a bastard and a lackey. Taking the concept of illegitimacy at its face value, he wants us to think

³²Strictly speaking, Smerdyakov's function is not so much to bastardize these ideas as to demonstrate that they are bastardized - illegitimate - to begin with. Likewise, the fact that Smerdyakov is a lackey brings out Dostoevsky's belief that these ideas are inherently "lackeyish". In *Demons*, Shatov declares that Nihilism "comes from lackeyishness of thinking" [Dostoevsky, 1994: 137 - emphasis added]. In the preliminary notes for *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky had written: "N.B.: Nihilism is lackeyishness of thought. A nihilist is a lackey of thought" [Pevear and Volokhonsky, 1994: 720].

of Smerdyakov the bastard as illegitimate to the bone. When Ivan finds the bastard wearing spectacles, he feels a disgust which one suspects Dostoevsky of sharing.

He was sitting in a gaily coloured quilted dressing gown, which, however, was rather worn and quite ragged. On his nose he had a pair of spectacles, which Ivan Fyodorovich had never seen on him before. This most trifling circumstance suddenly made Ivan Fyodorovich even doubly angry, as it were: 'Such a creature, and in spectacles to boot!' Smerdyakov slowly raised his head and peered intently through the spectacles at his visitor; then he slowly removed them and raised himself a little from the bench, but somehow not altogether respectfully, somehow even lazily ... All of this instantly flashed through Ivan, and he at once grasped and noted it all, and most of all the look in Smerdyakov's eyes, decidedly malicious, unfriendly, and even haughty: 'Why are you hanging about here,' it seemed to say, 'didn't we already settle everything before? Why have you come again?' Ivan Fyodorovich could barely contain himself.... [613]

Later in the same conversation, Ivan turns his attention to the reading matter of the bespectacled bastard:

'What are you doing studying French vocables?' Ivan nodded towards the notebook on the table.

'And why shouldn't I be studying them, sir, so as to further my education thereby, supposing that some day I myself may chance to be in those happy parts of Europe.'

'Listen, monster,' Ivan's eyes started flashing, and he was shaking all over. [616-617]

Smerdyakov has already committed the murder by this time, which is part of the reason why Ivan is in a rage. But his anger is distinctly heightened by the spectacles, the French vocables, the disrespectful demeanour - expressions of the same obnoxious desire to improve social standing that lay behind the parricide. Parricide is the end point of the modern madness that begins when a lackey dons a pair of glasses. The problem of suffering was not to be solved by such disruptions of the social order. The thing to do was to become reconciled to your position with the aid of Christian love.

If Dostoevsky is to demonstrate that this is the only possible answer, he must depict Smerdyakov's revolution as a failure. Accordingly, Smerdyakov swiftly finds that the crime does nothing to improve his standing in Ivan's eyes, and the thwarted lackey rapidly succumbs to a mysterious sense of despair. He surrenders the crime's financial proceeds, which are a hollow prize without the power he had also expected to gain.

"Take the money with you, sir, take it away," Smerdyakov sighed.

"Of course I shall take it away! But why are you giving it back to me, if you killed because of it?" Ivan looked at him in great surprise.

"I've got no use at all for it, sir," Smerdyakov said in a trembling voice, waving his hand. "There was such a former thought, sir, that I could begin a life on such money in Moscow, or even more so abroad, I did have such a dream, sir, and even more so as 'everything is permitted.'" [632]

When, shortly thereafter, Smerdyakov hangs himself, the futility of his deed is finally confirmed. The prophecy of Zosima, the holy man, is worth repeating, for the abject demise of Smerdyakov has resoundingly endorsed it.

“The world has proclaimed freedom, especially of late, but what do we see in this freedom of theirs: only slavery and suicide! For the world says: ‘You have needs, therefore satisfy them, for you have the same rights as the noblest and richest men. Do not be afraid to satisfy them, but even increase them’ - this is the current teaching of the world. And in this they see freedom. But what comes of this right to increase one’s needs? For the rich, isolation and spiritual suicide; for the poor, envy and murder.” [313]

Dostoevsky’s radical unconscious

On a superficial level, then, the character of Smerdyakov serves to discredit certain revolutionary ideas by giving illiterate voice to them and ultimately putting them into practice in the act of parricide. But Smerdyakov ends up exceeding and thereby betraying his official mission, by having experiences which raise the possibility that his politics are legitimate. In this respect, one might say that the novel bears traces of an intelligence which lies beneath or beyond the author’s narrow conscious intentions. But it is emphatically an unconscious of a political, rather than a sexual, kind.

One can further observe the operation of this radical unconscious, this repressed liberalism, in another of the novel's servant characters: old Grigory, Fyodor's other retainer. On the face of it, Grigory looks like Dostoevsky's ideal servant. He lives by the creed he voices during Dmitri's trial: "I am a subordinate man.... If the authorities see fit to deride me, then I must endure it" [666]. Grigory is a far better servant than Smerdyakov. He is also a far better father than Fyodor Pavlovich: he lavishly mourns the death of his only biological child, he is appropriately firm and God-fearing in his upbringing of Smerdyakov, and he plays a substantial and loving role in the rearing of the legitimate brothers as well. [14, 95]

So the character of Grigory comes in handy to underscore the point that the godless Fyodor Karamazov is a father in name only. But on the whole, Dostoevsky somewhat unfairly withholds his sympathies from the faithful old servant. Early in the novel, the narrator sees fit to characterise Grigory as "a gloomy, stupid, and obstinate pedant" [13]. One's suspicion that the novelist himself might share this view firms after an interesting exchange. Mitya, during the course of a physical attack on his blood father, casually assaults old Grigory, who voices a grievance which looks perfectly legitimate: "I used to wash him in a tub ... Me he dared [to hit] ...!" Grigory kept repeating" [140]. But Ivan, of all people, is quick to put Grigory in his place: "He 'dared' father, too, not just you!" he says, "twisting his mouth" [ibid.]. In other words, the fact that Grigory washed the young Mitya in a tub, while the boy's blood father was out carousing somewhere, is useful in so far as it discredits the godless Fyodor; but one should not bother to consider its bearing on the irrelevant question of Grigory's humanity. When push comes to shove, Fyodor Pavlovich is still the more worthy man of the pair - the only worthy man. Grigory is only a servant, an unperson, whose suffering is

by definition of a lower order than his master's. Even through the radical Ivan, Dostoevsky cannot perceive that kicking Grigory is the worse crime.

This discomfoting motif is repeated on the night of the murder, when Mitya *again* attacks Grigory, this time so brutally that he believes the old man has died. "That old man," Mitya laments, " - he carried me in his arms, gentlemen, he washed me in a tub when I was a three-year-old child and abandoned by everyone, he was my own father ...!" [486]. Reading this, we might think that Mitya is fully alive to the enormity of killing a man who has been, to all intents and purposes, a father to him. But it soon emerges that Mitya still thinks of this deed as small potatoes in comparison to the murder of a blood father, even if that father is Fyodor Karamazov. "Would I be talking like this," he protests, "would I be moving like this, would I look at you and at the world like this, if I really were a parricide, *when even the inadvertent killing of Grigory gave me no rest all night...*" [486 - emphasis added].

These disturbing passages reproduce the contradictions of Dostoevsky's politics. On the one hand, there are certain points where his thinking seems to coincide with that of the decadents. The criterion of social rank might tell us that Fyodor is superior to Grigory, but Dostoevsky makes Grigory an infinitely better person than Fyodor. Therefore the division of humans into classes is wholly arbitrary. But this is where the resemblance to radical thinking stops. What Dostoevsky means is that the class system looks frighteningly arbitrary *at the moment*, because there is no strong religious belief to shore it up - which is precisely why strong religious belief should make a swift return. He is not suggesting that anarchy is the true nature of things, but that anarchy is what things degenerate into in the absence of God. Dostoevsky *wants* Fyodor to be better than Grigory. He wants the master and blood father restored to his rightful role of pre-eminence. And so parricide

remains an unspeakable crime even when its victim is unspeakable himself. It is a violation of the *ideal* father-son relationship, which is the cornerstone of the ideal power structure.

Another telling difference between Fyodor Pavlovich and Grigory emerges in their respective responses when Dmitri attacks them. Grigory, as we have seen, takes deep personal umbrage, and has a right to. Fyodor, on the other hand, takes a more abstract kind of offence, and in doing so situates parricidal violence in its broader, political, context.

Of course, in these fashionable times it's customary to count fathers and mothers as a prejudice,³³ but the law, it seems, even in our time, does not allow people to pull their old fathers by the hair and kick them in the mug with their heels, on the floor, in their own house, and boast about coming back and killing them completely.... [174]

It is grossly audacious of Fyodor to say this: how could one honour a man like him out of anything *except* prejudice? But that audacity only echoes Dostoevsky's view of things. It is the duty of the Christian son to honour his father, no matter how dishonourably the father behaves. Hence when Mitya's attorney, Fetyukovich, adduces old Karamazov's appalling record in mitigation of his client's supposed crime, Dostoevsky is scornful - even though the lawyer's dim view of the delinquent father is in almost complete accord with the novelist's own. "One must treat words honestly," insists Fetyukovich,

³³In Magarshack's translation: "it's the fashion to regard *honouring* your father and mother as a prejudice..." [1982: 202 - emphasis added].

and I shall allow myself to name a thing by the proper word, the proper appellation: such a father as the murdered old Karamazov cannot and does not deserve to be called a father. Love for the father that is not justified by the father is an absurdity, an impossibility. Love cannot be created out of nothing.... 'Fathers, provoke not your children,' writes the apostle.... I quote these holy words now not for the sake of my client, but as a reminder to all fathers.... I speak not only to fathers here, but to all fathers I cry out: 'Fathers, provoke not your children!' ... Otherwise we are not fathers but enemies of our children, and they are not our children but our enemies, and we ourselves have made them our enemies.

[744]

Thus far Fetyukovich's argument seems consistent enough with the Dostoevskian view, right down to the quotation from the Old Testament. Modern fathers should clean up their acts. But Dostoevsky only wants to *explain* the act of parricide, to demonstrate that it is a product of modern tendencies - tendencies which must therefore stand condemned. Fetyukovich not only wants to explain the act, he wants to *excuse* it. So on the basis of their shared condemnation of the modern father, Fetyukovich erects a superstructure which Dostoevsky finds profoundly objectionable.

Let us be brave, gentlemen of the jury, let us even be bold, it is even our duty to be so in the present moment and not to be afraid of certain words and ideas, like Moscow merchants' wives who are afraid of 'metal' and 'brimstone.' No, let us prove, on the contrary, that the progress of the past few years has touched our development as well, and let us say straight out: he who begets is

not yet a father; a father is he who begets and proves worthy of it. Of course, there is another meaning, another interpretation of the word 'father,' which insists that my father, though a monster, though a villain to his children, is still my father simply because he begot me. But this meaning is, so to speak, a mystical one, which I do not understand with my reason, but can only accept by my faith, or, more precisely, *on faith*, like many other things that I do not understand, but that religion nonetheless tells me to believe. [744-745]

Fetyukovich condemns the modern father, but is happy to appeal to other elements of modernity - to progress, to reason, to the modern lack of faith in faith itself - in order to bolster his abhorrent conclusion that, if such a father was not a father, then

Such a murder is not a murder. Such a murder is not a parricide, either. No, the murder of such a father cannot be called parricide. Such a murder can be considered parricide only out of prejudice! [747]

Dostoevsky, while he is happy with the notion that Fyodor Karamazov is not an adequate father, plainly believes that his murder still deserves the chilling name of parricide. On Fetyukovich's terms, this belief means that Dostoevsky is prejudiced. How right is that suggestion? Certainly, Dostoevsky's replies to Fetyukovich's argument tend more to the prejudicial than the substantial. For a start, he gives Fetyukovich a ridiculous name: a *fetyuk* is a "ninny" [Peace, 1971: 281]. Moreover, he gives the chapter in which Fetyukovich's speech occurs a prejudicial title: 'An Adulterer of Thought'. But behind that prejudicial

title lurks the solidest of Dostoevsky's grievances against Fetyukovich. "Fetyukovich 'adulterers'," Pevear and Volokhonsky explain in their 'Notes', "by what he omits" [1992: 795]. Specifically, he fails to qualify his quotation of Colossians 3:21 ("Fathers provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged") with a quotation of the preceding verse ("Children, obey your parents in all things: for this is well pleasing unto the Lord").

Why, though, should Fetyukovich feel obliged to allude to a verse which not only contradicts his own argument, but also makes a nonsense of the verse beside it? For although these two verses can happily co-exist in the world of ideals, it is hard to see how they can be reconciled in a serious discussion about the real world. If one is to condemn fathers for provoking their children to anger, then it seems illogical, if not downright hypocritical, to also condemn children for becoming angry when provoked. In the real world, one has to choose: either one must excuse (or at the very least understand) filial disobedience when the parent is blatantly wrong, or else one should abandon all inspection of the parent's ethics - what is the point, if Big Brother is Always Right? On the other hand, the two main points of Fetyukovich's argument (such a father cannot be called father; therefore, such a parricide cannot be called a parricide) at least have the virtue of being logically consistent. Dostoevsky condemns society according to a set of unexamined ideals by which any reality will be found wanting - isn't that the very essence of prejudice? "Eloquence aside, gentlemen," says an anonymous observer of the trial, "people can't be allowed to go breaking their fathers' heads with steelyards. Otherwise where will we end up?" [752].³⁴ One's

³⁴The Prosecutor offers an almost identical argument: "But if parricide is a prejudice, and if every child ought to ask his father, 'Father, why should I love you?' - what will become of us, what will become of the foundations of society, where will the family end up?" [749].

inclination is to suppose that this person is being held up as an example of the complacent philistinism of the average Russian. Yet isn't this precisely what Dostoevsky's own position, putting *its* eloquence aside, amounts to? He opens up contemporary society; shows us how diseased its heart is; and then sews the ailing patient back up again without any further surgery.³⁵

The verses of Colossians adjacent to those I have already quoted contain some further none-too-subtle endorsements of patriarchy. "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord," runs 3:18. "Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh; not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but in singleness of heart, fearing God," says 3:22. These verses read like a stripped-down version of Dostoevsky's belief in the sacredness of the political and economic structures of his age - of which Smerdyakov's crime is the supreme violation. Like an advocate of trickle-down economics, Dostoevsky urged the underprivileged - wives, children, servants - to be patient, since the answer to their problems could only be bestowed by the man at the top of the heap. "Fathers, provoke not your children to anger." "Husbands, love your wives and be not bitter against them" (3:19).³⁶

Colossians contains no parallel verse urging masters to do the right thing by their servants. But Dostoevsky, via Zosima, provides his

³⁵Or, as Elisio Vivas puts it: "From Dostoevsky's novels ... one can neither abstract an ethical imperative nor a systematic philosophy capable of doing justice to the dramatic tensions to be found in life as he grasped it" [1962: 88].

³⁶In discussing Dostoevsky's extremely reactionary politics, we must understand what they were a reaction to: namely, a Russia which was, as Eric Hobsbawm explains, "organized in a way which to all educated Europeans appeared positively prehistoric by the later nineteenth century, namely as a bureaucratized autocracy. This very fact made revolution the *only* method of changing state policy other than catching the Tsar's ear and moving the machinery of state into action from above.... Since change of one sort or another was almost universally felt to be needed, virtually everybody from what in the west would have been moderate conservatives to the extreme left was obliged to be a revolutionary. The only question was, of what kind" [Hobsbawm, 1987: 292]. There is a corollary to Hobsbawm's observation: any Russian who, like Dostoevsky, opposed social change, was obliged to be an extreme reactionary, a friend of tyranny.

own: "The world cannot do without servants, but see to it that your servant is freer in spirit than if he were not a servant. And why can I not be the servant of my servant...?" [Dostoevsky, 1992: 317]. The message is familiar: there must be no radical alteration of the social structure; things can only be fixed by more love. Dostoevsky is simply unable to see how things could function without servants.

But once again the political myopia co-exists with a frightening sharpness of artistic vision, for Zosima's platitudinous solution to the master-servant problem comes just after a speech in which he has delineated that problem in vivid and moving detail. He has recounted an incident from his youth when, "ferocious and ugly" on the eve of a duel, he had taken things out on his servant:

I got angry with my orderly Alfansy and struck him twice in the face with all my might, so that his face was all bloody. He had not been long in my service, and I had had occasion to strike him before, yet never with such beastly cruelty.... He is standing before me, and I strike him in the face with all my might, and he keeps his arms at his sides, head erect, eyes staring straight ahead as if he were at attention; he winces at each blow, and does not even dare raise a hand to shield himself - this is what a man can be brought to, a man beating his fellow man! What a crime! It was as if a sharp needle went through my soul. [297-298]

The next day he was moved to apologize:

"'Alfansy,' I said, 'yesterday I struck you twice in the face. Forgive me,' I said. He started as if he were afraid, and I saw that it was not enough, not enough; and suddenly, just as I was,

epaulettes and all, I threw myself at his feet with my forehead to the ground: 'Forgive me!' I said. At that he was completely astounded: 'Your honour, my dear master, but how can you ... I'm not worthy ...,' and he suddenly began weeping himself, just as I had done shortly before...." [298]

At the gut level of symbolism, Dostoevsky seems all in favour of social equality: the master, *epaulettes and all*, descends to the level of the servant, and they weep together, united by their humanity. But Dostoevsky the social theorist is wholly unable to concede that this terrible beating of a servant by a master, and the servant's abject acceptance of it, might have something to do with the structure of the master-servant relationship, and that the surest way of stopping the violence is to dismantle the structure.

Nor is Zosima's beating of Alfansy an anomalous moment in the novel. On the contrary, oppressive violence is presented as a general problem. "Generally speaking," declares Fyodor Pavlovich, in reference to Smerdyakov, "the Russian peasant should be whipped. I have always maintained that. Our peasants are cheats, they're not worth our pity, and it's good that they're still sometimes given a birching. The strength of the Russian land is in its birches. If the forests were destroyed, it would be the end of the Russian land" [132]. Being a patriarch, Fyodor is in a position to inflict this philosophy not just on his peasants, but on his children and his wife - or, in his case, wives. He succeeds, for example, in turning his second wife, Sofia Ivanovna, into an hysteric or "shrieker",³⁷

³⁷A 'shrieker', the narrator explains, is the victim of "a terrible women's disease that seems to occur predominantly in our Russia, that it is a testimony to the hard lot of our peasant women, caused by exhausting work too soon after difficult, improper birth-giving without any medical help, and, besides that, by desperate grief, beatings, and so on, which the nature of many women, after all, as the general examples show, cannot endure" [47].

by subjecting her to various forms of exploitation and oppression, such as staging orgies in her presence. And he rapes and effectively murders poor Stinking Lizaveta, who dies while giving birth to Smerdyakov - who will in turn suffer the consequences of that foul act for his whole life. Smerdyakov is, according to Mitya, "Not just a coward, but a conjunction of all cowardice in the world taken together, walking on two legs. He was born of a chicken. Every time he talked with me, he trembled for fear I might kill him, though I never even raised my hand" [475].

The point is that the master doesn't *have* to raise his hand - the victimisation of the servant has already occurred at a structural level. Smerdyakov's cowering in the presence of Mitya recalls Alfansy's "starting as if afraid" when his master merely speaks to him. It also brings to mind the conduct of a certain real-life victim of violence: the Rat Man, victim of savage childhood beatings at the hands of his father. When in Freud's office, the Rat Man

avoid[ed] my proximity for fear of my giving him a beating. If he stayed on the sofa he behaved like some one in desperate terror trying to save himself from castigations of terrific violence; he would bury his head in his hands, cover his face with his arm, jump up suddenly and run away, his features distorted with pain, and so on. He remembered that his father had had a passionate temper, and sometimes in his violence had not known where to stop. [Freud, 1991a: 89-90]

In the previous chapter, I pointed out that the Rat Man's behaviour - which Freud of course ascribes to an oedipal fear of the father - is fairly intelligible as a purely physical fear. If such a fear pointed to a

broader truth than the fact that his father regularly bashed him, perhaps what it pointed to was the political structure that underlay the violence. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, physical violence, and the fear of it, quite clearly harbours political implications of this kind. Here, for example, is the abject Captain Snegiryov, evincing Rat Man-like cowardice when meeting with Alyosha.

His face expressed a sort of extreme insolence, and at the same time - which was strange - an obvious cowardice. He looked like a man who had been submissive for a long time and suffered much, but had suddenly jumped up and tried to assert himself. Or, better still, like a man who wants terribly to hit you, but is terribly afraid that you are going to hit him. [Dostoevsky, 1992: 198]

Why should Snegiryov exhibit this fear of violence in the presence of the infinitely meek Alyosha? The fact that he does so strongly suggests that it is not really physical fear, or physical threat, we are dealing with here, but a translation of social tensions into physical terms. Snegiryov is socially downtrodden; knows it; and resents it, although not quite enough to do something about it. Alyosha confirms this reading when he explains Snegiryov's behaviour to the child Krasotkin. "There are people who feel deeply but are beaten down," he says. "Their buffoonery is something like a spiteful irony against those to whom they dare not speak the truth directly because of a long-standing, humiliating timidity before them" [537]. Alyosha uses the phrase "beaten down" in a metaphorical sense, of course, but it is a metaphor which comes very close to, and quite often coincides with, the literal truth. (Snegiryov is beaten down both physically and socially when Dmitri publicly pulls his

beard.) The desire to hit one's superiors, and the even greater fear of being hit by them, is a far from arbitrary symbol for the aspiration and suppression of the lower classes. The artist in Dostoevsky sees that violence is inscribed in the structure, that social power relations quiver on the edge of physical assault.

Smerdyakov's crime makes power relations spill over that edge. On the face of it, as we have seen, Dostoevsky uses the act of parricide as the clinching argument for the preservation of the oppressive social order: it is meant to demonstrate the recklessness of putting dangerous ideas about liberty into the heads of the lower orders. But the act of parricide can also be read as a subversion of Dostoevsky's reactionary position - as a radical warning about the consequences of oppression. When Mitya calls Smerdyakov a "chicken born of a chicken", he literally dehumanises Smerdyakov, and indicates that his subhuman status goes back to his very birth. "You think you're a human being?" the young Smerdyakov is asked by Grigory. "You are not a human being, you were begotten of bathhouse slime, that's who you are...." The narrator ominously adds: "Smerdyakov, it turned out later, never could forgive him these words" [124]. More often than not, Smerdyakov is referred to simply as the "lackey", but there are frequent occasions when he is more literally dehumanised: he is referred to, variously, as a "Balaam's Ass" [123], a fly [632], a dog [661, 686], a "stinking dog" [591], a chicken [475] and a rat [707].

Dostoevsky himself, as we have seen, is not innocent of dehumanising Smerdyakov. And yet he knows that such oppression ramifies, has consequences. When the young Smerdyakov is oppressed, there are fatal consequences for those unfortunate creatures even lower

on the scale than himself - actual animals.³⁸ "As a child he was fond of hanging cats and then burying them with ceremony" [124]. As an adult,

³⁸In January 1876, in *The Diary of a Writer*, Dostoevsky recalls a scene from his youth which shows us that he was acutely aware of this principle at a conscious level. "The incident happened long ago in my, so to speak, pre-historical times - in 1837 - when I was about fifteen years old and was en route from Moscow to Petersburg.... One evening we were stopping at a station, an inn.... Across the street, directly opposite the inn, was the station building. Suddenly a courier's troika speedily drove up to the station's platform; a courier jumped out of the carriage.... He ran into the station house and there, surely, must have 'swallowed' a glass of vodka.... Meanwhile, a fresh, spirited, substitute troika drove up to the postal station, and the yamschik, a young lad of about twenty ... jumped into the coachman's seat. Forthwith, the courier came running down the staircase and seated himself in the carriage. The yamschik stirred on, but hardly had he started to move than the courier rose up and silently raised his hardy right fist and, from above, painfully brought it down on the back of the yamschik's head. He jolted forward, lifted his whip and, with all his strength, lashed the wheel horse. The horses dashed forward but this in no way appeased the courier. Here there was method and not mere irritation - something preconceived and tested by long years of experience - and the dreadful fist soared again and again and struck blows on the back of the head. And then, again and again, and thus it continued until the troika disappeared out of sight. Of course, the yamschik, who could hardly keep his balance, incessantly, every second, like a madman, lashed the horses and, finally, he had whipped them up to the point where they started dashing at top speed, as if possessed. Our coachman explained to me that virtually all couriers are riding in approximately the same manner, but that this one is particularly notorious and everybody knows him.... '[O]n approaching a station, he invariably gets up on his feet: he starts at a distance of approximately one verst and he keeps swinging his fist up and down, in the same manner, until he reaches the station, so that everybody in the village should gaze at him with amazement. Well, after that one's neck hurts for a whole month.' Upon the return of the lad, people laugh at him: 'See, the courier cudgelled your neck!' And that same day he may beat his wife: 'At least, you'll pay for it!'... No doubt, it is inhuman on the part of the yamschik to lash the horses so ferociously: of course, they reach the station all out of breath and quite exhausted. Still, who among the personnel of the Society for the Protection of Animals would venture to bring a charge against the peasant lad for his inhuman treatment of his little horses? Am I right?

"This disgusting scene has remained in my memory all my life.... This little scene appeared to me, so to speak, as an emblem, as something which very graphically demonstrated the link between cause and effect. Here every blow dealt at the animal leaped out of every blow dealt at the man" [Dostoevsky, 1949: 185-186].

In a Notebook of the same period, Dostoevsky writes, in connection with the same memory: "The courier. Right here is where humaneness should be preached. The main thing is that this is not a picture, but actually a symbol. In fact: he is a barbarian for having lashed his horses like that, but then his every lash was caused by a blow on his own back, without these blows he would not have whipped the horses. I repeat: this is not a picture from my reminiscences, but a symbol, a symbol to be engraved in print for society, that the picture is real, I swear. Teach first how to be humane with humans, and then the Russian man will understand that he has to be humane with beasts too" [Proffer, 1975: 111].

Significantly, in his *Diary* discussion of the incident Dostoevsky goes on to apply his analysis of cause and effect in cruelty to the case of an oppressive patriarch: "Oh, no doubt, today the situation is not as it used to be forty years ago.... There is no courier but there is poison liquor. Well, in what way is 'green liquor' comparable with the courier? -It certainly is in that it also may make man bestial and cattle-like; it makes him cruel and detracts him from serene thoughts.... A drunken man has no compassion toward

he does not wholly abandon such hobbies: one of his favourite "tricks" is to feed dogs bread with pins in it - a trick he teaches the young Ilyusha Snegiryov, thereby contributing to that child's premature death [535].

But when Smerdyakov graduates to parricide, he takes out his resentments, rather more justly, on their only begetter. The unconscious suggestion that Smerdyakov is driven to parricide because he is treated like an animal is most tellingly made when Ivan calls Smerdyakov a "viper". "Tell all, viper!" he cries, seizing the parricide by the shoulders [623]. On the surface, this is no more significant than any of the other numerous occasions on which Smerdyakov is treated as an animal. But the word "viper" occurs in a phrase which Ivan deploys on no fewer than three separate occasions to illustrate the inevitability of the crime of parricide: *one viper will devour another*. His most forcible statement of this formula comes during the trial: "Who doesn't wish for his father's death.... A murdered father, and they pretend to be frightened.... They pull faces to each other. Liars! Everyone wants his father dead. Viper devours viper.... If there were no parricide, they'd all get angry and go home in a foul temper.... Circuses! 'Bread and circuses!'" [686 - see also 143, 611].

What the text seems to tell us at a symbolic level is that if you treat your servant or your son like an animal, then he'll react like one. Covertly, then, the book suggests that the parricide might more justly be blamed on Smerdyakov's dehumanisers than on Smerdyakov himself. Dostoevsky the novelist holds the patriarch responsible for his own

animals; he deserts his wife and his children. A drunken husband came to his wife, whom he had deserted and whom, along with her children, he had failed to support for many months, and demanded vodka from her; then she, that galley-slave working-woman (please think of how, thus far, woman's labor has been rated!), who did not know how she could manage to feed her children, seized a knife and thrust it into him. This happened recently and she is going to be tried. But there is no point in my speaking about her; such cases may be counted by the hundreds and the thousands - one has merely to open the papers" [Dostoevsky, 1949: 186-187].

demise to a far greater degree than Dostoevsky the polemicist does. The story seems thoroughly to bear out, indeed, an interpretation of parricide which the conscious Dostoevsky raises only in order to mock: the socialist reading advanced by Rakitin. "The whole tragedy of the crime on trial [Rakitin] portrayed as resulting from the ingrained habits of serfdom and a Russia immersed in disorder and suffering from a lack of proper institutions" [667]. This explanation does look somewhat arbitrary if one supposes that the killer is the man on trial; but in reference to the actual killer it is not unreasonable.³⁹ Likewise, the thesis of Rakitin's radical newspaper article on the crime looks valid enough when we remember that the real killer is Smerdyakov. As Mitya explains, Rakitin wants to write "something with a tendency: 'It was impossible for him not to kill,⁴⁰ he was a victim of his environment,' and so on, he explained it to me. It will have a tinge of socialism, he says. So, devil take him, let it have a tinge, it's all the same to me" [588].

Against Dostoevsky's will, his narrative has a similar 'tendency'. Indeed Smerdyakov's deed can be construed as a critique not only of the oppression he personally suffers, but also of the general dehumanisation

³⁹The defence attorney, likewise, advances an argument justifying the (hypothetical) crime of Mitya which is even more valid as a defence of the son who really did commit the parricide, Smerdyakov. "Yes, it is a horrible thing to shed a father's blood - his blood who begot me, his blood who loved me, his life's blood who did not spare himself for me, who from childhood ached with all my aches, who all his life suffered for my happiness and lived only in my joys, my successes! Oh, to kill such a father - who could even dream of it! Gentlemen of the jury, what is a father, a real father, what does this great word mean, what terribly great idea is contained in this appellation? We have just indicated something of what a true father is and ought to be. In the present case ... the father, the late Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov, in no way fitted the idea of a father that has just spoken to our hearts. That is a calamity. Yes, indeed, some fathers are like a calamity.... What did my client meet when he came home to his father.... [W]ho is responsible for his destiny, who is responsible that for all his good inclinations, his noble, sensitive heart, he received such an absurd upbringing? Did anyone teach him any sense at all, has he been enlightened by learning, did anyone give him at least a little love in his childhood? My client grew up in God's keeping - that is, *like a wild beast* " [724-743 - emphasis added].

⁴⁰Or, as Garnett's translation has it, "He couldn't help *murdering his father*, he was corrupted by his environment..." [Dostoevsky, 1974: 622 - italics added]. The word 'father' does not occur in the Russian text: but Garnett's insertion of it does not violate the novel's subtext, which consistently argues that parricide is a socially-conditioned crime.

of the two social classes he represents: servants and sons. A parallel between the suffering of children and the suffering of servants is drawn during an almost surreal encounter between a peasant and the schoolboy Krasotkin. The peasant greets him:

"Well, I declare. You must be one of them schoolboys."

"One of them schoolboys."

"And what, do they whip you?"

"Not really, so-so."

"Does it hurt?"

"It can."

"E-eh, that's life!" the peasant sighed from the bottom of his heart. [528]

Krasotkin, as it happens, is lying to humour the peasant. But on a general level, the peasant is not mistaken in supposing that children are as abused as he is. As we have seen, the real-life cases of child abuse recorded in the *Diary of a Writer* helped to shape Dostoevsky's philosophical position on the family, and his novel has the maltreatment of children as one of its most persistent motifs. All of the book's key philosophical voices take the pain of children as the paradigmatic form of suffering. "Woe to him who offends a child," says Zosima [319]. Condemning the use of child labour in factories and workshops, he counsels: "Let there be none of that, monks, let there be no torture of children..." [315]. Ivan considers the suffering of children to be the limit case of unnecessary evil, and runs through some newspaper-derived cases of child abuse as a prelude to his *Legend of the Grand Inquisitor*. "I took children only so as to make it more obvious," he tells Alyosha. "I've purposely narrowed down my theme.... [T]here are hosts

of questions, but I've taken only the children, because here what I need to say is irrefutably clear. Listen: if everyone must suffer, in order to buy eternal harmony with their suffering, pray tell me what have children got to do with it?" [243-244].

This is a recurrence of a paradox that I have spoken of before: the paradox that Ivan bases his atheism on the same social data that Dostoevsky uses as a premise for his furious religiosity.⁴¹ In a letter written during the novel's composition, Dostoevsky spoke of this shared perspective:

the ideas expressed in that part by Ivan Karamazov are the synthesis of modern Russian anarchism: a denial not of God but of the purport of His creation. The whole of socialism began with the denial of the purport of historic reality and reached the point of complete destruction and anarchy. My hero takes a theme which, *in my opinion, is simply irrefutable*: the senselessness of the suffering of children, and deduces from it the absurdity of the entire historic reality...." [Quoted by Magarshack, 1962: 476 - emphasis added]

It is highly significant that Dostoevsky conflates socialism and anarchism. He thinks of Russian leftism solely in terms of its metaphysics, its opposition to God, and therefore believes it is wholly destructive. By overlooking the left's positive commitment to the righting of social wrongs, Dostoevsky skates around the argument that the suffering of children might be ameliorated by means of social reform. Instead, he writes as if there were only two possible responses to the

⁴¹Alyosha's response to Ivan's Inquisitor story places this paradox in a nutshell: "Your poem praises Jesus, it doesn't revile him ... as you meant it to" [260].

suffering of children: the purely nihilistic one, as adopted by Ivan, which says that the suffering of children is senseless, and therefore everything is senseless; and his own, which agrees that the suffering of children is indeed senseless when viewed in secular terms, but insists that it can be made sense of - rationalised, legitimated - by reference to the existence of a higher power.

This somewhat obscene glorification of oppression is expressed most vividly by Mitya, the falsely accused parricide who has nightmares in which the problem of unjust suffering is personified by a starving, freezing, crying, poverty-stricken child - the 'wee one', as the Pevear/Volokhonsky translation has it. "It is for the 'wee one' that I will go [to the mines]," says Mitya, deciding to accept condemnation for the crime he hasn't committed. "Because everyone is guilty for everyone else. For all the 'wee ones', because there are little children and big children. All people are 'wee ones'. And I'll go for all of them, because there must be someone who will go for all of them.... Oh, yes, we'll be in chains, and there will be no freedom, but then, in our great grief, we will arise once more into joy, without which it's not possible for man to live, or for God to be, for God gives joy..." [591-592].

This injunction to sing in one's chains, to embrace the joys of incarceration, is to say the least a conservative response to social injustice. But the case of Mitya offers an embarrassingly succinct reminder that Dostoevsky, when it comes to the crunch, is not merely complacent about oppression on earth - he is actually *in favour* of it, because it brings the sufferer closer to God. "I accept the torment of accusation and of my disgrace before all," says Mitya, "I want to suffer and be purified by suffering" [509]. Dostoevsky's faith is firmly predicated on pain, poverty, slavery. In Mitya's words: "It's impossible for a convict to

be without God, *even more impossible than for a non-convict*" [592 - emphasis added].

Dostoevsky thinks of the socialist position - or at any rate represents it - as consisting of his own bleak views on the inevitability of suffering and injustice, minus the consoling belief in God. The argument he presents us with, then, does not really pit the actual merits of socialism against those of Christianity. It is more of a wrestle between the doubter in Dostoevsky and the believer - with the odds heavily weighted in the latter's favour.⁴² This is why the *politics* of the Grand Inquisitor, which supposedly constitute the apotheosis of evil, look on examination so strikingly similar to Dostoevsky's own. The Inquisitor, too, takes the suffering of children as emblematic of the general human condition; and he too argues, only marginally more bluntly than Dostoevsky does, that such oppression is to be encouraged. In a society made up of a few masters and a lot of slaves, at least one knows where one stands. The oppressed should rejoice in their lack of freedom, says the Inquisitor. "Oh, we shall finally convince them not to be proud, for you [i.e. Christ] raised them up and thereby taught them pride; we shall prove to them that they are feeble, that they are only pitiful children, but that a child's happiness is sweeter than any other" [259].

The Inquisitor, of course, is nominally condemning a different *type* of freedom from that which frightens Dostoevsky. It is the freedom promised by Christ that the Inquisitor detests, whereas Dostoevsky fears the freedom promised by various new-fangled European *isms*. But otherwise it could quite easily be Dostoevsky, rather than the Inquisitor, who declares: "mankind ... are slaves, though they were created rebels....

⁴²In a letter written shortly after his release from prison, Dostoevsky had this to say about his faith. "I will tell you regarding myself that I am a child of the age, a child of nonbelief and doubt up till now and even (I know it) until my coffin closes. What terrible torments this thirst to believe has cost me and still costs me, becoming stronger in my soul, the more there is in me of contrary reasonings" [Pevear, 1990: xiii].

They are little children, who rebel in class and drive out the teacher.... But finally the foolish children will understand that although they are rebels, they are feeble rebels, who cannot endure their own rebellion" [256].

The Inquisitor's contempt for the feeble rebellion of the underclasses reminds one of Dostoevsky's contempt for the aspirations of the rebellious slave Smerdyakov, whose foolish uprising is proved futile by his subsequent suicide. Both Dostoevsky and the Inquisitor want us to embrace *lack of freedom*, so that we might enjoy the subordinate but snug status of a child. For Dostoevsky, the oppressed ought to stop their whining and look instead to God; for the Inquisitor, salvation lies with a group of secular tyrants whom the people will *look upon* as gods:

forever incapable of being free, because they are feeble, depraved, nonentities and rebels.... [The weak] are depraved and rebels, but in the end it is they who will become obedient. They will marvel at us, and look upon us as gods, because we, standing at their head, have agreed to suffer freedom and to rule over them - so terrible will it become for them in the end to be free! ... There is no more ceaseless or tormenting care for man, as long as he remains free, than to find someone to bow down to as soon as possible. [253-254]

If one were to update the Inquisitor's views on freedom to the political scene of Dostoevsky's day, one would get something very like Nietzsche's suggestion in *Beyond Good and Evil* that "the democratic movement in Europe" will lead to

a levelling and mediocritizing of man ... the total impression produced by such future Europeans will probably be that of multifarious, garrulous, weak-willed and highly employable workers who *need* a master, a commander, as they need their daily bread; while, therefore, the democratization of Europe will lead to the production of a type prepared for *slavery* in the subtlest sense.... What I mean to say is that the democratization of Europe is at the same time an involuntary arrangement for the breeding of *tyrants*.... " [Nietzsche, 1990: 172-173].

Dostoevsky advances an analogous proposition about the authority of God: remove Him from the world, and look what happens: you end up needing Him back all the more urgently. But a Nietzschean social position - that is to say, an appreciation of the virtues of tyranny on earth - is contained in Dostoevsky's religious stance. So Freud is not wrong when he perceives a connection between Dostoevsky's "veneration both for the Tsar and for the God of the Christians" [Freud, 1950f: 223]. Nor can one argue with Freud's contention that "Dostoevsky threw away the chance of becoming a teacher and liberator of humanity and made himself one with their gaolers" [223]: this point looks entirely valid when one compares the revolutionary artistic insights of *The Brothers Karamazov* with its myopic reactionary politics. But when Freud suggests that these politics were a mere echo of the novelist's attitude to his father, one is obliged to part company from him. He says: "If on the whole he did not achieve freedom and became a reactionary, that was because the filial guilt, which is present in human beings generally and on which religious feeling is built, had attained in him a super-individual intensity..." [234].

According to Freud, Dostoevsky's politics had nothing to do with the fact that he was Russian, nor with the fact that he lived in an age of declining faith and of impending revolution. These are problematic claims, but let us leave them aside and examine another curious aspect of Freud's analysis: his assumption that Dostoevsky's politics entailed a lack of freedom for *himself*, and might therefore be construed as a masochistic manifestation of his guilt. The authorial politics I have extracted from *The Brothers Karamazov* do not match this description. Dostoevsky's theory about the joy of suffering tended to focus on the suffering of classes to which he did not belong: he was not a child, not a wife, not a servant, and his celebration of the subservience of these classes looks decidedly more sadistic than masochistic. Like most reactionaries, Dostoevsky occupied a position comfortably close to the top of the heap.

On the other hand, there was one underclass to which Dostoevsky had once belonged: that of political prisoner. Freud says: "Dostoevsky's condemnation as a political prisoner was unjust and he must have known it, but he accepted the undeserved punishment at the hands of the Little Father, the Tsar, as a substitute for the punishment he deserved for his sin against his real father" [233]. It is this consideration alone which makes it possible to impute masochistic motives to Dostoevsky's defence of the political *status quo*. And if we return to the novel, we see that the fact of Dostoevsky's unjust imprisonment is congenial to the Freudian project in another way. It provides ammunition for a Freudian reading of Mitya, the falsely accused parricide who elects to embrace his punishment. Having found that the main protagonists of the parricide - Fyodor, its victim; Smerdyakov, its perpetrator; and Ivan, its ideological puppet-master - stubbornly refuse to act in accordance with Freudian doctrine, we must now turn to the character of Dmitri, and see whether he can come to the rescue of the theory of the Oedipus complex.

Dmitri and the Financial Motive

The fact about Dmitri which most vigorously encourages the Freudian reading of him is this: he and his father have a sexual rivalry. Freud does not need to apply any analysis to extract this fact: it is there, in black and white. The useful question to ask is how important this sexual rivalry is. Is it of central significance to their antagonism, or is it a merely peripheral component of a struggle whose essence lies elsewhere? Such questions were not likely to occur to Freud - why would he want to subject a sexual rivalry between a father and son to any further analysis, given his belief that sex was the fundamental issue behind all father-son conflict? But in the pages that follow, I will argue that the sexual rivalry between Mitya and his father is indeed susceptible to further analysis, which will reveal it to be a mere token of a deeper struggle. In other words, their sexual struggle can be shown to have that merely symbolic status that Freud ascribed to every father-son dispute that was *not* sexual. The matter at the root of their struggle, I will argue, is money.

"First of all," the narrator tells us very early in the novel, "this Dmitri Fyodorovich was the only one of Fyodor Pavlovich's three sons who grew up in the conviction that he, at any rate, had some property and would be independent when he came of age" [11]. Dmitri will be rudely disabused of this conviction, of course. Does his subsequent sexual rivalry with his father have some connection with his fiduciary grievance? Michael Holquist effectively concedes this point when, during his Freudian reading of the novel, he says: "Dmitry's case fits the

Freudian paradigm most neatly, as his father's power is dramatized in the property and the woman he denies the son" [Holquist, 1977: 180]. Holquist is evidently trying to say something about the merits of the psychoanalytical reading, but he inadvertently points to its poverty. If the neatest fit it can find is a son whose sexual grudge against his father is irretrievably wrapped up in a wider grudge about property, then the Freudian paradigm would seem to be in trouble in this novel. Even the brother who comes closest to fulfilling Freudian expectations still has the effect of problematising them, and exposing their crude reductivism. It follows that the other brothers embarrass the Freudian paradigm still further. In the ultra-political atmosphere of *The Brothers Karamazov*, Freud's practice of treating sexuality as something pure, detachable from culture, seems especially indefensible. Dostoevsky shows us no romance that is uncontaminated by problems of power or money. Mitya, condemning Rakitin's desire for the rich widow Khokhlakov, says that "he had such nasty, sensual drool on his lips - drooling not over Khokhlakov, but over the hundred and fifty thousand [roubles]" [590]. As we shall see, this potent image of a sensual lust driven by latent financial motives could be applied to nearly every other case of desire in the novel - including, most critically, the lust of the father and of the son for the same woman.

Sex is not the only mode of social interaction which the novel seems to consider to be fundamentally about money. It is worth repeating the point that when Smerdyakov commits parricide, he also robs his victim of three thousand roubles, which he then tries to give away to Ivan in the following scene:

"Take the money with you, sir, take it away," Smerdyakov sighed.

"Of course I shall take it away! But why are you giving it back to me, if you killed because of it?" Ivan looked at him in great surprise.

"I've got no use at all for it, sir," Smerdyakov said in a trembling voice, waving his hand. "There was such a former thought, sir, that I could begin a life on such money in Moscow, or even more so abroad, I did have such a dream, sir, and even more so as 'everything is permitted.'" [623]

One is inclined to suspect that robbery was not the fundamental motive of his crime, given that Smerdyakov yields the money so casually, and given that he also claims to have murdered in the service of Ivan's seductive ideology. But as I have already pointed out, when one examines Smerdyakov's apparently conflicting explanations of his crime it becomes possible to organise them into a coherent story, to which the problem of his poverty is in fact central. Earlier in the novel, Smerdyakov complains that Ivan "made reference to me that I'm a stinking lackey. He considers me as maybe rebelling, but he's mistaken, miss. If I had just so much in my pocket, I'd have left long ago" [225]. So want of money keeps Smerdyakov in the same undesirable place, geographically and socially. Poverty confounds his ambitions, forcing them to fester. A person in such a position has more right than Ivan to embrace anti-social ideologies, be they progressive or downright nihilistic. So Smerdyakov is not necessarily lying when he claims that his crime was motivated both by his poverty and by the doctrine that "everything is permitted." Interestingly, Dostoevsky's earlier killer Raskolnikov was also motivated by a blend of poverty and ideology. Dostoevsky outlined the plot of *Crime and Punishment* in a letter of 1865 thus: "A young man, an expelled university student, *petit bourgeois* in

origin, is living in extreme poverty. Through the shallowness and instability of his thought he has surrendered himself to certain strange and half-baked ideas which are in the air, and has decided to extricate himself at a stroke from his terrible position" [quoted by Peace, 1971: 25]. Notice, however, that in Dostoevsky's mind Raskolnikov *surrenders* himself to these theories through the *shallowness* of his thought: Dostoevsky does not entertain the possibility that the extremely poor have a *deep* reason to be interested in these theories. That would raise the frightening possibility that such notions had a certain validity. Hence we have the surreal scene in which Smerdyakov, having successfully redressed his poverty by the crime of parricide, is made to abjectly surrender the fruits of his crime. Dostoevsky wants to prove that the problems of the poor cannot be solved by revolutionary violence.

There is a further point about the financial profit that Smerdyakov (temporarily) derives from the parricide. By robbing his dead father, the illegitimate son makes an illegitimate financial gain. This is a perverse parody of the process of patrilineal inheritance, by which the legitimate sons will enjoy a legitimate financial gain from their father's demise.⁴³ *Every* son, therefore, has a motive for parricide: a point made with characteristic bluntness by Smerdyakov, in conversation with Ivan:

"As for killing - you, personally, could never have done it, sir, and you didn't want to do it either; but as for wanting someone else to kill - that you did want."

" ... But why should I want it, why in hell should I have wanted it?"

⁴³In keeping with his general desire to be legitimate, Smerdyakov hopes to share in that legitimate gain, as he tells Ivan: "the inheritance, when you got it, you might even reward me some time later ... because, after all, you'd have had the pleasure of getting that inheritance through me, otherwise, what with marrying Agrafena Alexandrovna, all you'd get is a fig ..." [627].

“What do you mean, why in hell, sir? What about the inheritance, sir?” Smerdyakov picked up venomously and even somehow vindictively. “After your parent, you, each of you three good brothers, would then get nearly forty thousand, and maybe even more, sir, but if Fyodor Pavlovich was to marry that same lady, Agrafena Alexandrovna, she would surely transfer all the capital to herself, right after the wedding, because she’s not at all stupid, sir, so that your parent wouldn’t even leave you two roubles, for all three of you good brothers. And was marriage so far off, sir? Only a hair’s breath, sir...” [615]

Smerdyakov here confirms a suggestion I advanced earlier, namely the suggestion that Dmitri’s “sexual” rivalry with his father over Agrafena Alexandrovna - also known as Grushenka - is but one battle in a war whose essence is financial. This is a point to which we shall return. What we must appreciate at the moment is the related point that the text is consistent with Freudian theory only insofar as it discovers the will to parricide even among the sons who do not commit the crime. It diverges crucially from psychoanalysis by finding money, not sexuality, at the root of that murderous will.

A Freudian reading is satisfied with the suggestion that Ivan is repulsed by Smerdyakov because he sees in him a grotesque reflection of his own desire to kill his father. But again the text goes further than psychoanalysis would like it to: it demonstrates that Ivan recognises the *financial* nature of that desire. When Smerdyakov hands him the proceeds of the crime, Ivan’s response is extremely suggestive: “Ivan stepped to the table, took the bundle, and began to unwrap it, but suddenly jerked back as if he had touched some loathsome, horrible viper.... Under the wrapping were found three packets of iridescent

hundred-rouble bills" [624]. The word "viper" takes us back, of course, to Ivan's contemptuous formula about parricide - "viper will devour viper" - in which the term "viper" signifies the hideous baseness of both the murderer and his victim. Now, crucially, money is symbolically identified as the third key participant in the crime, a fundamental part of the vile materialism of which parricide was the ultimate expression.

While the nexus between parricide and money seems to put Ivan psychologically closer to the crime, it undoubtedly takes Dostoevsky further away from it. To Dostoevsky, the presence of money tended to mean the absence of God. One can see this most clearly when he has Alyosha condemn the Grand Inquisitor and his fellow tyrants on the grounds that their ideal is "Simply the lust for power, *for filthy earthly lucre*,⁴⁴ enslavement ... a sort of future serfdom with them as the landowners ... that's all they have" [260 - emphasis added]. As we have already seen, the politics of the Grand Inquisitor do not differ substantially from Dostoevsky's own, except in the sense that the former are strictly earth-bound and the latter assume the existence of God. But to Dostoevsky, of course, this difference was all: it is the very reason why

⁴⁴Cf. Titus 1:7. "For a bishop must be blameless, as the steward of God; not selfwilled, not soon angry, not given to wine, no striker, not given to filthy lucre." The phrase "filthy lucre" also points to an issue which must be mentioned while we are on the subject of cash - namely Freud's equation of money with faeces. (Norman O. Brown has 'Filthy Lucre' as the title of the chapter in which he deals with this sub-theme of psychoanalysis in his book *Life Against Death*.) At this stage of my argument, a Freudian counterargument of the following kind becomes possible: "Perhaps the novel is about money: but money is only faeces anyway, and so in the end the novel can be reclaimed by Freud." But I would be more inclined to welcome this objection than to combat it. For it would amount to an concession that Freud's principal argument - the argument that the parricide is motivated by repressed sexuality - has been effectively bettered by the argument that the parricide is motivated by an unGodly materialism of which money is the chief manifestation. Psychoanalysis can reclaim the book only by resorting to a relatively obscure subthesis. This tells us far less about the novel than it tells us about Freudian theory, and its infinite resilience in the face of any argument. I have never disputed the fact that the novel *can* be read along Freudian lines. Anything *can* be read along Freudian lines. The question is whether one *should* read it along those lines, whether any genuine enlightenment can be gained by doing so. And on this question, Freud's unflagging ability to explain everything - also known as his evasion of the test of falsification - can hardly be said to count entirely in his favour.

the Inquisitor must be judged abhorrent. It seems significant that lucre should be one of the key words Alyosha uses to identify, and condemn, the Inquisitor's gross materialism.

Another salient feature of Alyosha's verdict is its equation of money with power. Smerdyakov, from the perspective of somebody who lacks both, also knows these things to be synonymous. He shrewdly guesses that Ivan will not reveal what he knows to the court because

"You're too intelligent, sir. You love money, that I know, sir, you also love respect, because you're very proud, you love women's charms exceedingly, *and most of all you love living in peaceful prosperity, without bowing to anyone....* You're like Fyodor Pavlovich most of all, it's you of all his children who came out resembling him most, having the same soul as him, sir." [632 - emphasis added]

So prosperity is the essence of dignity, of pride, of living life without having to bow down. Smerdyakov has learned this principle the hard way, by living with lack of money and a consequent lack of dignity. Fyodor Pavlovich, on the other hand, has enjoyed the benefits of it: he has money and therefore rank, even though morally he is worthless. But the materialist values he lives by end up killing him. He dies because he trusts the parricide, Smerdyakov, and he trusts him because of money. "Smerdyakov, ages ago, had found [some] money his master had dropped, and instead of keeping it had brought it to his master, who 'gave him a gold piece' as a reward, and thereafter began trusting him in all things" [664]. Ever the materialist, Fyodor Pavlovich thinks of this financial sacrifice as the ultimate sign of loyalty. "[A] Balaam's ass like him thinks and thinks, and the devil knows what he's going to think up

for himself," he says of Smerdyakov. "I for one know that he can't stand me, or anybody else.... Yet he doesn't steal, that's the thing..." [132].

This is all profoundly ironic: what Smerdyakov is in the process of thinking up for himself is a crime which will roundly punish the materialist Fyodor for using money as the ultimate measure of loyalty. Fyodor knows that the lackey "can't stand him", but owing to his perverse conviction that Smerdyakov's financial honesty is "the thing", he trusts him to an absurd and fatal extent. He transfers his three thousand roubles to a new hiding place suggested by the lackey, and teaches him a secret pattern of knocks designed to allow Grushenka entry to his home while denying it to the violent Dmitri. Smerdyakov promptly divulges the code to the latter, in the hope that he will use it to gain entry and slaughter his father, leaving Smerdyakov free to make off with the cash. But when that plot fails, Smerdyakov simply uses the knocks himself, in full view of the master.

I went up to the master's window again and said: 'She's here, she's come, Agrafena Alexandrovna is here, she wants to get in.' He got all startled, just like a baby.... He looked at me through the window, believing it and not believing it, but he was afraid to open the door - it's me he's afraid of, I thought. And here's a funny thing: I suddenly decided to knock those same signals on the window, right in front of his eyes, meaning Grushenka was there: he didn't seem to believe words, but as soon as I knocked the signals, he ran at once to open the door. He opened it. [628]

This bizarre scene shows us both the master's intense fear of his lackey - a fear which proves well-grounded - and the absurdly irrational nature of his faith in him. Both of these emotions have financial roots.

In order to see the ideal attitude to money, we have to look to Alyosha. Even as a young child, "he seemed not to know the value of money at all - not, of course, in the literal sense. When he was given pocket money, which he himself never asked for, he either did not know what to do with it for weeks on end, or was so terribly careless of it that it disappeared in a moment" [21]. At the opposite pole stands his father, who declares: "with money one only needs to want, Alexei Fyodorovich, sir, and one gets everything" [173].⁴⁵ Fyodor's grotesque materialism is allowed to pollute his family ties: his relations with his sons are acutely, almost essentially, financial, and his oppression of them has monetary denial at its core. This is most obvious in the case of Dmitri. All the sorry events in Dostoevsky's tale proceed from Dmitri's belief that his father has financially cheated him. "Listen," declares Dmitri early in the novel:

"legally he owes me nothing. I've already gotten everything out of him, everything, I know that. But morally he owes me something, doesn't he? He started with my mother's twenty-eight thousand and made a hundred thousand out of it. Let him give me only three of those twenty-eight thousands, only three, and bring up my life from the Pit.... And I'll stop at those three thousands, I give you my solid word on it, and he'll never hear of me again. *For the last time I give him a chance to be my father.*" [120 - emphasis added]

To be a father means to give money to one's children.⁴⁶ One can scarcely blame Dmitri for holding this narrow, earth-bound conception of

⁴⁵The Godlessness of this philosophy is underlined when Fyodor says, in the same speech, "I don't want your paradise, Alexei Fyodorovich, let it be known to you; it's even unfitting for a decent man to go to your paradise, if there really is such a place" [173].

⁴⁶It is no doubt significant that Dostoevsky's last letter to his father was a request for money. Dostoevsky received the sum requested, together with a letter outlining his

fatherly responsibility, for he has inherited it from his reprehensible father. When Ivan arrives in town, the narrator notes that

It was strange that so learned, so proud, and seemingly so prudent a young man should suddenly appear in such a scandalous house before such a father, who had ignored him all his life, who did not know or remember him, and who, though if his son had asked, he would certainly not have given any money for anything in the world or under any circumstances, nonetheless was afraid all his life that his sons Ivan and Alexei, too, would one day come and ask for money. [17]

One would think that the question of money was irrelevant next to the terrible facts that the father has ignored his son all his life and doesn't even remember him. But instead, Fyodor's financial greed is named as the culminating term of his unworthiness, as though it were taken for granted that giving loans is the central part of a father's duty. Money is again allocated a surreal pre-eminence when Fyodor disowns his second son thus: "I refuse to acknowledge Ivan. Where did he come from? He's not our kind at all. Why should I leave him anything? I won't even leave a will, let that be known to you" [175]. So central is money to Karamazovian ethics that Dmitri is for a long time happier to be thought guilty of the blasphemy of parricide than to confess to his dishonourable theft of Katerina Ivanovna's fifteen-hundred roubles.

Dostoevsky wants to use the Karamazovs to condemn the lack of Christian love in the modern family. His way of showing us the absence of the spiritual is to show us the overwhelming presence of the material:

father's impending financial ruin. This "despairing communication to his son was, literally, his last testament," explains Joseph Frank, "and Dostoevsky must have received it almost simultaneously with the news of his father's death" [Frank, 1976: 85].

sex, violence, goitres, blood - and above all money.⁴⁷ An ideal relation between father and son seems to be impossible so long as money is around to corrupt it. It is important to note that this rule does not only apply to the Karamazovs, in which the father scandalously flouts capitalistic convention. It also applies to the briefly-glimpsed Samsonov family, whose patriarch - a grotesque old merchant, widower and "patron" of Grushenka - fulfils his obligations as a capitalist to the letter. "[W]ho else is a capitalist in this little town if not you ..." Mitya asks him [371]. When he dies, Samsonov wills everything to his sons, as a proper capitalist must. He is a model capitalist in life, too: but hardly a model father. The family is as devoid of love as the Karamazovs. Samsonov is "a tyrant over his two grown sons ... whom he had kept about him all his life on the level of servants" [344 - 345]. (Samsonov has a daughter, too, but his keeping her on the level of a servant does not, apparently, warrant a special mention. Nor, naturally, does his daughter feature in his will. In respect of matters of power and money, the daughter is as far out of the picture as her dead mother. The intergenerational struggle is essentially a struggle between fathers and sons.)

The patriarchal structure of the Samsonov family is reified by the layout of their house:

On the ground floor lived Samsonov's two married sons with their families, his elderly sister, and one unmarried daughter ...

⁴⁷Schopenhauer said that money is human happiness in the abstract, but for the Karamazovs and their kind money is animal debauchery in the abstract. When Dmitri is entrusted with the task of taking Katerina Ivanovna's money to Moscow, he swiftly converts the cash into base sensual pleasure. "[I]n my beggar's pocket, three thousand roubles turned up.... I got some gypsies to join us, gypsy women, champagne, got all the peasants drunk on champagne, all the village women and girls, thousands were flying around. In three days I was broke, but a hero" [118]. Ashamed afterwards, he begs Alyosha to transmit his apologies to Katerina. "You could tell her: 'He's a base sensualist, a mean creature with irrepressible passions. He did not send your money that time, he spent it, because he couldn't help himself, like an animal'" [119].

Both his children and his clerks were cramped in their quarters, but the old man occupied the upper floor by himself and would not even share it with his daughter, who looked after him.... The 'upstairs' consisted of a number of large formal rooms, furnished in the merchant style of old, with long, dull rows of clumsy mahogany armchairs and sidechairs along the walls, with crystal chandeliers in dust covers, and sullen mirrors between the windows. All these rooms stood completely empty and uninhabited, because the sick old man huddled himself in one little room, his remote and tiny bedroom.... Because of his swollen legs, the old man was almost entirely unable to walk, and only rarely got up from his leather chair.... [368-369]

Despite old Samsonov's handicap, his strapping sons "trembl[e] before their father" [369] - vividly underscoring the point that his power has nothing remotely to do with physical authority. His hegemony is exclusively financial. And it must be kept in mind that this grotesque situation is not an anomaly: the Samsonovs adhere strictly to the rules of patriarchy and capitalism.

Samsonov is important in another respect: in his capacity as the patron of Grushenka. Although Grushenka receives nothing in his will, Samsonov

helped Grushenka a great deal with advice on how to manage 'her own money' and brought 'business' her way. When Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov, who originally was connected with Grushenka with regard to some chance '*gescheft*,' ended quite unexpectedly to himself by falling head over heels in love with her and nearly losing his reason, old Samsonov, who by then

already had one foot in the grave, chuckled greatly. It is remarkable that Grushenka, throughout their acquaintance, was fully and even, as it were, cordially frank with her old man, and apparently with no one else in the whole world. More recently, when Dmitri Fyodorovich had also appeared suddenly with his love, the old man had stopped chuckling. On the contrary, one day he seriously and sternly advised Grushenka: 'If you must choose between the two of them, father and son, choose the old man, only in such a way, however, that the old scoundrel is certain to marry you, and makes over at least some of his money in advance...' ... I will also note in passing [adds the narrator] that although many in our town knew about the absurd and ugly rivalry at that time between the Karamazovs, father and son, the object of which was Grushenka, *few then understood the true meaning of her relations with the two of them, the old man and the son.* [345 - emphasis added]

So to discover the *true meaning* of Grushenka's relations with the father and the son, one has to look *beyond the sexual*.⁴⁸ One then finds that the real object of desire, and of contention, is money. Dostoevsky's narrator therefore issues a pre-emptive strike against the Freudian reading, and indeed against the whole notion of the Oedipus complex. Financial conditions, he warns us, were capable of producing tensions which could look a lot like sexual ones. It is surely significant that both of Fyodor Karamazov's marriages have monetary origins: his first wife

⁴⁸Magarshack's translation (and Garnett's translation agrees with it) makes it clear that this point about economic determinacy is being made specifically about Grushenka's feelings for the men: "Let me also observe in passing that though many people in our town were aware of the absurd and monstrous rivalry of the Karamazovs, father and son, the object of which was Grushenka, hardly anyone understood what was really behind *her attitude to them*" [Dostoevsky: 1982 - emphasis added]. But as I am arguing, money lurks just as decisively behind their attitude to her.

he marries for her dowry; his second he meets in a province "where he happened to have gone for a bit of contracting business in the company of some little Jew" [12].

The economic origins of Mitya's infatuation with Grushenka are also spelled out:

"First of all I went to give her a beating. I had heard, and now know for certain, that this Grushenka had gotten from this captain, father's agent, a promissory note in my name, so that she could demand payment and that would stop me and shut me up. They wanted to frighten me. So I set out to give Grushenka a beating. I'd seen her before around town. Nothing striking. I knew about the old merchant, who on top of everything else is lying sick now, paralyzed, but still will leave her a nice sum. I also knew that she likes making money, that she does make it, loans it out at wicked rates of interest, a sly fox, a rogue, merciless. I went to give her a beating, and stayed." [118]

Present from the start, money plays a critical role in Dmitri's continuing affair with Grushenka:

if [Grushenka] should say to him: 'I'm yours, take me away,' how was he to take her away? Where would he get the means, the money to do it? Just at that time he had exhausted all his income from Fyodor Pavlovich's handouts, which until then had continued nonstop for so many years. Of course Grushenka had money, but on this point Mitya suddenly turned out to be terribly proud: he wanted to take her away himself, to start the new life with her on his own money, not on hers; he could not even

imagine himself taking money from her and suffered at the thought to the point of painful revulsion.... All of this might well have proceeded indirectly and unwittingly, as it were, from the secret suffering of his conscience over Katerina Ivanovna's money, which he had thievishly appropriated: 'I am a scoundrel before one woman, and I'll prove at once to be a scoundrel before the other,' he thought then, as he himself confessed later, 'and Grushenka, if she finds out, will not want such a scoundrel.' And so, where to find the means, where to find this fatal money? Otherwise all was lost, and nothing would happen, 'for the sole reason that there wasn't enough money - oh, shame!'

To anticipate: the thing was that he perhaps knew where to get the money, he perhaps knew where it lay. [366]

The *fatal* money plays the role that Freud thinks is played by sexuality: it underlies social relations, governs emotions like shame and love, and provokes the crime of parricide.

If there is any remaining doubt that it is money, rather than sexuality, that is the ultimate cause of the rivalry between Fyodor and Dmitri, surely it is dispelled when Fyodor toys with the notion of bribing Dmitri for Grushenka's hand - and then rejects it, on the grounds that he loves the money more than the woman!

"Some foolishness almost came into my head yesterday, when I told you to come today: I wanted to find out through you about Mitka - what if I counted him out a thousand, or maybe two, right now: would he agree, beggar and scoundrel that he is, to clear out altogether, for about five years, or better thirty-five, without Grushka, and give her up completely, eh, what?"

"I ... I'll ask him," Alyosha murmured. "If it were all three thousand, then maybe he ..."

"Lies! There's no need to ask him now, no need at all! ... I've changed my mind ... I'll give him nothing, not a jot, I need my dear money myself." [175]

So much for the notion that financial relations are a mere shadow of sexual ones.

"Papa, Dear Papa": Captain Snegiryov and Ilyusha

As a coda to this discussion of money in the novel, I want to consider a family which, like the Samsonovs, throws much light on the relations of the Karamazovs, but does so from another angle. I refer to the Snegiryov family, in which our attention is once again drawn almost exclusively to the males: the abject Captain Snegiryov and his dying - and ultimately dead - son, Ilyusha.

Vladimir Nabokov, in his *Lectures on Russian Literature*, asserts that the Ilyusha subplot stands "quite independently, sticking quite obviously out of the general scheme of the book" [Nabokov, 1982: 135]. I want to argue that the opposite is the case, and that the general scheme of the book (if we understand that phrase to refer to the book's philosophical message, its ideology - a usage that Nabokov would no doubt have found objectionable) can be found in concentrated form in the relationship between Ilyusha and his father.

The significance of the Ilyusha character is hinted at after his death: "strangely, there was almost no smell from the corpse" [Dostoevsky, 1992:

769]. This strange circumstance seems to be connected to an even stranger one which occurs earlier in the novel: the great stench produced by the corpse of Zosima. Considered in isolation, Zosima's malodorous decomposition is something of a mystery: why would Dostoevsky want to malign, symbolically, a character whose philosophy he so strongly agrees with? When one considers Zosima's stench in relation to Ilyusha's odourless decay, though, one can construct a possible meaning. Even the ideal father - Zosima - stinks, suggesting that at some deep level Dostoevsky felt the institution of fatherhood to be inherently corrupt; whereas the ideal, loving son is pure, saintly, and consequently free of the reek of decay.⁴⁹ The purity of young Ilyusha, and his love of his father despite the father's buffoonery, comes as an example to us all, as Alyosha stresses in the novel's very last speech: "Gentlemen, my dear gentlemen, let us all be as generous and brave as Ilyusheska..." [775].

One can cast some further light on the Ilyusha subplot by thinking of the personal tragedy suffered by Dostoevsky as he was embarking on the novel. In 1878, his three-year-old son Alyosha died of a massive epileptic fit. "I've never been so sad," wrote Dostoevsky to his brother. "What depressed him particularly," wrote Dostoevsky's wife, "was the fact that the child died of epilepsy, an illness he had inherited from his father" [both quoted by Magarshack, 1962: 473]. This evidence entitles us to believe that Dostoevsky *was* suffering from a irrational sense of guilt when he wrote his novel.⁵⁰ But that guilt related to the death of his *son*, not his father.

If we search the novel for manifestations of this authorial guilt, we will probably think of the fact that the wicked father is named Fyodor,

⁴⁹Of course the novel's major portrait of an ideal son is Alyosha - but Dostoevsky could hardly kill him off, for he was supposed to be the hero of the novel's sequel.

⁵⁰"The earliest manuscript notes for *The Brothers Karamazov* date from mid-April 1878.... The death of Dostoevsky's son Liosha, attributed to epilepsy, occurred on May 16, 1878" [Rice, 1985: 253].

and his saintly son Alyosha.⁵¹ Or we might think of Grigory, mortified by horror and shame over the brief life of his six-fingered baby son. But perhaps the most intense figuring of Dostoevsky's guilt-ridden grief comes in the shape of the shattered Snegiryov, weeping "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem ..." as his son slowly dies [562].

The relationship between Snegiryov and his son is at once the novel's most ideal and its most corrupted father-son relation. This apparent paradox is in fact a concise statement of the book's principal argument, which is that the family is a holy institution in the process of being ripped apart by materialist forces. When Dostoevsky focuses on the Karamazovs, one can almost forget the first half of that proposition - for Alyosha is the sole member of that clan who embodies the eternal holy ideal. The rest of them stand entirely for dissolution. In the Snegiryov family, both halves of the argument are intensely present: the father-son bond is holy and strong, but under unholy attack from foul contemporary forces.

Snegiryov, of course, is a buffoon. But Dostoevsky meticulously shows how he has become a buffoon - through social deprivation. Indeed Alyosha himself, as we have seen (on page 353 above), excuses Snegiryov's buffoonery on the grounds that he has been "beaten down". That beating down has been done by social forces, chiefly poverty. We have already seen how that abstract beating is echoed by the literal beating administered by Dmitri,⁵² who humiliates Snegiryov in the street by

⁵¹Did Hamlet's intense *love* for his late father spring from a similar sense of fatherly guilt on the part of his creator? Shakespeare's only son, Hamnet (or Hamlet - the names seem to have been interchangeable) died at the age of eleven in 1596, four years before the composition of the play. And legend has it, of course, that Shakespeare himself played the ghost of Hamlet's father [see Elton, 1904: 223].

⁵²Who could be a more appropriate emissary of ugly material forces than a Karamazov? Indeed *two* of the Karamazovs are effectively responsible for the beating, for Dmitri has come to the Captain seeking a promissory note sold by his Fyodor Karamazov. In effect, then, the beating incident involves one (thoroughly corrupted) father-son relationship assaulting another one which is still sacred, and which manages to remain so thanks to the premature death of the son.

pulling his beard in front of a large audience. But the size of the audience matters less than the crucial fact that Snegiryov's son is one of its members. As Snegiryov bitterly recalls:

"'Papa,' he cried, 'papa!' He caught hold of me, hugged me, tried to pull me away, crying to my offender: 'Let go, let go, it's my papa, my papa, forgive him' - that was what he cried: 'Forgive him!' And he took hold of him, too, with his little hands, and kissed his hand, that very hand, sir ... I remember his face at that moment, I have not forgotten it, sir, and I will not forget it.... this genealogical family picture forever imprinted itself in the memory of Ilyusha's soul. No, it's not for us to stay gentry, sir." [204]

Snegiryov sees this incident as he sees everything: through the eyes of his son. One can't help feeling that Mitya has committed a form of spiritual parricide here, by irrevocably blighting the son's image of his father. Dmitri's intervention permanently compromises Snegiryov's natural authority over his son: their power relationship is effectively inverted, so that it is the father who refers to the son as "Dear old fellow!" [768] - and the son who conducts himself like an adult, and has the maturity to utter, on his deathbed, this final wish: "Papa will cry, be with papa" [768]. Dmitri kills the son's respect - but not his love - for his father, and in a round-about way might even be said to kill the son himself: for it is as a direct result of Mitya's humiliation of the Captain that Ilyusha becomes involved in the rock fight in which he is struck on the heart - the injury which apparently precipitates the boy's fatal illness [205]. And it is another Karamazov, Smerdyakov, who has taught Ilyusha to feed pins to dogs, thus saddling the boy with a horrible sense of guilt which stifles his chances of recovery.

By publicly robbing Snegiryov of his dignity, Mitya is only dramatically re-enacting what poverty has already achieved. Snegiryov himself, speaking to Alyosha, acknowledges this - and note that he again sees the shame of his *son* as the ultimate barometer of his indignity.

“An ordinary boy, a weak son, would have given in, would have felt ashamed of his father, but this one stood up for his father, alone against everyone. For his father, and for the truth, sir, for justice, sir. Because what he suffered then, as he kissed your brother’s hand and cried to him: ‘Forgive my papa, forgive my papa’ - that alone God knows, and I, sir. And that is how our children - I mean, not yours but ours, sir, *the children of the despised but noble poor* - learn the truth on earth when they are just nine years old, sir. The rich ones - what do they know? In their whole lives they never sound such depths, and my Ilyushka, at that very moment in the square, sir, when he kissed his hand, at that very moment he went through the whole truth, sir.”
[205-206: emphasis added]

Poverty cost Snegiryov his dignity, and he *literally* cannot afford to get it back. If he challenges Mitya, and is crippled or killed, then “who will feed them all sir? Or should I then send Ilyusha out daily to beg instead of going to school?” [204]. This might or might not be a rationalisation of Snegiryov’s cowardice - but it *is* rational. Honour is a luxury which the poor can’t afford. Once again this is a truth which is at its most touching when it is reflected in the eyes of the son.

‘Papa,’ he said, ‘papa!’ ‘What?’ I said to him, and I could see that his eyes were flashing. ‘Papa, the way he treated you, papa!’ ‘It can’t

be helped, Ilyusha,' I said. 'Don't make peace with him, papa, don't make peace. The boys say he gave you ten roubles for it.' 'No, Ilyusha,' I said, 'I won't take money from him, not for anything.' Then he started shaking all over, seized my hand in both his hands, and kissed it again. 'Papa,' he said, 'papa, challenge him to a duel; they tease me at school, they say you're a coward and won't challenge him to a duel, but you'll take his ten roubles.' 'It's not possible for me to challenge him to a duel, Ilyusha,' I answered, and explained to him briefly all that I just explained to you about that. He listened. 'Papa,' he said, 'papa, even so, don't make peace with him: I'll grow up, I'll challenge him myself, and I'll kill him!'⁵³ And his eyes were flashing and shining. Well, I'm still

⁵³Freud makes no mention of the Ilyusha subplot. But there is a remarkable similarity between it and a scene from Freud's childhood recounted in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. As a child, Freud explains, his favourite hero had been Hannibal, "the Semitic commander". This identification had arisen out of the following childhood experience.

I might have been ten or twelve years old when my father began to take me on his walks, and in his conversation to reveal his views on the things of this world. Thus it was that he once told me the following incident, in order to show me that I had been born into happier times than he: "When I was a young man, I was walking one Saturday along the street in the village where you were born; I was well-dressed, with a new fur cap on my head. Up comes a Christian, who knocks my cap into the mud, and shouts, 'Jew, get off the pavement!'" - "And what did you do?" - "I went into the street and picked up my hat," he calmly replied. That did not seem heroic on the part of the big, strong man who was leading me, a little fellow, by the hand. I contrasted this situation, which did not please me, with another, more in harmony with my sentiments - the scene in which Hannibal's father, Hamilcar Barcas, made his son swear before the household altar to take vengeance on the Romans. Ever since then Hannibal has had a place in my phantasies. [Freud, 1938: 260]

Like Snegiryov, Freud's father knows that the in adult world, taking revenge is generally more difficult than not taking revenge. And like Ilyusha, the young Sigmund dreams of exacting vengeance on his father's behalf - a fantasy motivated, one would think, by extreme love of his father, and therefore a fantasy which scarcely conforms to the classic oedipal model. Had the young Freud been a proper Freudian, he would surely have given a psychological thumbs-up to the Christian's assault on his father - perhaps he would even have grown up to become a Christian himself out of psychological sympathy. One must remember, of course, that Freud does, via the concept of ambivalence, stress that one's oedipal hatred of one's father will be accompanied by a loving reverence of him. But since this love is not unconscious (there being no call to repress it), it is not entirely clear how it can be potent enough to engineer a dream or a fantasy - mental products which Freud tended to think of as granting fulfilment to *unconscious* wishes.

his father for all that, I had to tell him the right thing. 'It's sinful to kill,' I said, 'even in a duel.' 'Papa,' he said, 'papa, I'll throw him down when I'm big, I'll knock the sword out of his hand with my sword, I'll rush at him, throw him down, hold my sword over him and say: I could kill you now, but I forgive you, so there!' You see, sir, what a process went on in his little head for these two days!... Again we went for a walk. 'Papa,' he asked, 'papa, is it true that the rich are stronger than anybody in the world?' 'Yes, Ilyusha,' I said, 'no one in the world is stronger than the rich.' 'Papa,' he said, 'I'll get rich, I'll become an officer, and I'll beat everybody, and the tsar will reward me. Then I'll come back, and nobody will dare....' [206-207]

For Dostoevsky, the fantasies of the son are motivated not by hatred of the father, but by love of him - and the father's dreams are motivated by an equally intense love of his son. But neither kind of dream can be satisfied without money: as we are vividly shown in the extraordinary scene when Alyosha offers Snegiryov, on behalf of Katerina Ivanovna, a gift to atone for Mitya's disgracing him: "two new, iridescent hundred-rouble bills" [209]. The money is the miracle that will finally permit Snegiryov to fulfil his patriarchal responsibilities, particularly in regard to his son. He raves:

"Listen, Alexei Fyodorovich, listen to me, sir, because the moment has now come for you to listen, sir, because you cannot even understand what these two hundred roubles can mean for me now.... I can now get treatment for mama and Ninichka - my hunchbacked angel, my daughter ... I can undertake treatment for my dear ones, sir, send the student to Petersburg, sir, and buy beef,

and introduce a new diet, sir. Lord, but this is a dream.... [P]erhaps now Ilyushka and I will indeed realize our dream: we'll buy a horse and a covered cart, and the horse will be black, he asked that it be black, and we'll set off as we were picturing it two days ago."

[210]

It is embarrassingly undignified of Smerdyakov to gush all this in front of a relative stranger. But he is only articulating the embarrassing indignity that is already inherent in the situation: his family life is a fiasco which no amount of will in the world can fix, but which can be remedied at a stroke by a couple of bits of coloured paper. Patriarchy is meant to endow him with power; but it is in these flimsy pieces of cash that the real power resides. Realising this, Snegiryov salvages his dignity in the only way that the situation allows. "[H]olding up both iridescent bills" he crumples them, throws them to the ground, and asserts his superiority to them by crushing them under his foot. "His whole figure presented a picture of inexplicable pride. 'Report to those who sent you that the whiskbroom does not sell his honour,' he called out, raising his arm in the air" [211-212].⁵⁴ Having done this, the whiskbroom turns to go; but he has one last, crucial, thing to say:

he turned around again, this time for the last time, and now there was no twisted laugh on his face, but, on the contrary, it was all shaken with tears. In a weeping, faltering, spluttering patter, he cried out:

'And what would I tell my boy, if I took money from you for our disgrace?' And having said this, he broke into a run, this

⁵⁴'Whiskbroom' is the nickname, inspired by the visual qualities of his facial hair, which Snegiryov has received from certain schoolmates of Ilyusha who witnessed the beard-pulling at the hands of Dmitri Karamazov.

time without turning around. Alyosha looked after him with inexpressible sadness. [212]

Again, it all ultimately comes down to his relations with his son. To this point, his son's fierce love for him has survived, perhaps even been reinforced by, Snegiryov's public humiliations. But those humiliations were inflicted by the world. To accept Katerina's money would be to participate, wilfully, in his own degradation - to accept that his honour, his dignity, his love for his family and theirs for him, are all less important things than money. Rejecting the offer is therefore a supreme moment for Snegiryov. He knows, he admits, that his family's health, perhaps their very lives, depend on these notes. (This point is subsequently brought home pitilessly by Dostoevsky during the fatal illness of Ilyusha.⁵⁵) So effectively, Snegiryov is obliged at this critical juncture to decide between preserving his son's respect for him, and preserving his son's life. He opts to preserve the former, and there can be no doubt that Dostoevsky applauds this choice. Snegiryov elects to embrace the holy ideal of family relations rather than succumb to the base reality, the materialist contamination of father-son relations which points the way to parricide. Lack of money strips the father of his dignity, and the son of his life: but not even death can destroy the holy bond between father and son. After all, what is a father without the respect of his son: he is Fyodor Karamazov, who maintains that "with money one can get almost everything", but who inspires so little love in his sons that one of them murders him, and the others, with only one exception,

⁵⁵The doctor tells Snegiryov that there is only one way of saving his son's life: a course of treatment that involves taking the boy to Syracuse, then the Caucasus, then Paris. The poverty-stricken father responds:

"'Doctor, doctor! But don't you see!' the captain again waved his hands, pointing in despair at the bare log walls of the entryway.

"'Ah, that is not my business,' the doctor grinned, 'I have merely said what science can say to your questions about last measures. As for the rest ... to my regret ... '" [560].

mentally applaud the deed. The Snegiryovs have love but no money, but to Dostoevsky - and who would dare to disagree with him? - they are infinitely richer than the Karamazovs.

“He rushed to me suddenly, threw his little arms around my neck, and hugged me. You know, when children are silent and proud, and have been holding back their tears for a long time, when they suddenly burst out, if a great grief comes, the tears just don’t flow, sir, they pour out in streams. With these warm streams he suddenly wet my whole face. He suddenly sobbed as if he were in convulsions, and began shaking and pressing me to him as I sat there on the stone. ‘Papa,’ he cried, ‘papa, dear papa, how he humiliated you!’ Then I began weeping too, sir. We were sitting, holding each other, and sobbing. ‘Papa,’ he said, ‘dear papa!’ ‘Ilyusha,’ I said, ‘dear Ilyusha!’ No one saw us then, sir, only God saw us - let’s hope he’ll enter it into my record, sir.” [208]

There, in a nutshell, is Dostoevsky’s ideal family - the father and son whipped and pummelled by the evil materialism of the world, but refusing to submit to it, taking refuge instead in their sacred love. One hardly needs to point out that Ilyusha’s heart is entirely free of parricidal desires. This is because Dostoevsky views parricide as a symptom of a disease which the Snegiryovs have refused to contract. The parricidal Karamazovs represent the corruption of the contemporary family by contemporary values. The Snegiryovs reminds us that nothing could be further from Dostoevsky’s idea of the norm in family relations than the will to parricide.

Freud is sometimes referred to, by critics who have perceived the fictional nature of his central claims, but who remain unwilling to dispense with his "achievement", as the last of the great nineteenth-century novelists. In the limited sense that his antennae picked up on the themes that preoccupied the creative artists of his time, this proposition is valid. But when one reads it alongside a genuinely great novel, psychoanalysis stands revealed as a comic strip. Even Smerdyakov and Snegiryov, both caricatures when compared with a creation like Ivan, are nevertheless endowed with richer and more complex motives than Freud granted to Leonardo or Shakespeare - or to Dostoevsky himself. Freud patronises Dostoevsky's reactionary politics, but the important thing to recognise is that Dostoevsky's cranky and narrow beliefs, unlike Freud's cranky and narrow beliefs, were not the whole point of his work. Dostoevsky's achievement does not stand or fall on the correctness of his ideas. What matters is his art, where he was capable of creating things that did not conform to his preconceptions. Freud could not even *see* things that did not conform to his preconceptions. Dostoevsky's convictions might have been supernatural, but there was something close to the scientific method - closer to the scientific method than we get from Freud, anyway - in his willingness to measure them against the world, even if it was only a world of his own creation. So vigorously does Dostoevsky put his prejudices to the fictional test that he ends up demonstrating their narrowness himself, drowning them under a rich brew of contradictory data, radical perceptions, self-doubt, negative capability. Even in a fictional world invented by the theorist himself, human behaviour proves too various to be unlocked by a single key. Fortunately for Dostoevsky, it is for the intensity of his imagination, and not for the quality of his theories, that we read him.

In the work of Freud, on the other hand, there is never any danger of data swamping theory. There is, however, a constant danger that the theory might overwhelm and reshape the data, as it does when Freud says that women have no conscience, or that Dostoevsky's epilepsy was hysterical, or that in Smerdyakov's parricide the motive of "sexual rivalry ... is laid bare". True, there are parts of Dostoevsky's novel - a sentence here, a passage there, a remark or two removed from their context - which do not have to be reshaped in order to repay the Freudian reading. But they repay it in the same way that the spots on a Dalmatian confirm the hypothesis that Dalmatians are black. Several things can be said in favour of the theory that Dalmatians are black. It is original. It is audacious. If it is correct, it could change our way of thinking about Dalmatians forever. Unfortunately it is not correct. When confronted by an actual Dalmatian, the hypothesis must be abandoned. Unless of course the hypothesis had been advanced by Freud - in that case the validity of the dog would probably have to be called into question. Are the "white" hairs really white, or can one discover blackness at their roots? Is the whiteness really there, or is one merely seeing it to fulfil one's wish that Freud is wrong? And in light of the strong probability that Dalmatians are black, haven't we got good cause to suppose that this black-and-white specimen before us is something other than a Dalmatian anyway?

For Freud never seemed to see why his main hypotheses should be considered more malleable than the things they were about. And since he was hypothesising about things considerably less tangible than dogs, his interpretive solipsism could be indulged with relative impunity. He wielded his theories like blunt instruments, bashing the data into shape. When the datum is a dream, or a lapse of memory, or a case history of a patient whom we cannot know except through Freud, it is hard to catch

him in the act. But when the object of his assault is a widely-available novel, we have the opportunity to compare the costs and benefits of his reading with those of a reading unfettered by his "insights". And when we do, we find that Freud does not read *The Brothers Karamazov* at all. He does everything but read it. He trawls it for points of agreement; reduces it, traduces it, cheapens it, distorts it. He shrinks its eight-hundred pages to a handful of supposedly suggestive phrases, and has as little interest in its bulk as an ivory hunter has in the elephant's corpse. He makes it mean less than it meant before he came along. If he can do this to our understanding of one novel, then what can he do - what has he done - to our understanding of the world?

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